

The cover art features two anime-style characters. In the upper half, a girl with long, straight purple hair and brown eyes looks directly at the viewer with a calm expression, her hand near her chin. She wears a purple and white outfit. In the lower half, a boy with spiky purple hair and a wide, toothy grin is shown in a dynamic, forward-leaning pose. He wears a dark, flowing cape. The background is a mix of bright orange flames and vibrant purple energy streaks. The title 'Demon King DAIMAŌ ACT8' is prominently displayed at the bottom in a stylized, colorful font.

Shoutarou Mizuki

Demon King
DAIMAŌ
ACT8

VISIT...

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Demon King
DAIMAŌ
ACT8

**“WE’LL HAVE
TO GO BACK
TO THE VERY
BEGINNING,”
KAZUKO
SAID.**



**“THE
DEMON
KING IS
HUMAN
AND YET
NOT
HUMAN.”**





The comic panel is split into two horizontal sections. The top section features a character with long white hair and green eyes, wearing a purple and white dress, standing on a rocky ledge. She is surrounded by several glowing blue and white mana balls. Behind her is a large, intricate pink circular magical阵 (mana circle) with various symbols and smaller circles. She has her hands outstretched in a gesture of control. The bottom section shows a close-up of a character with short brown hair and blue eyes, wearing a red hooded cloak, looking up with a shocked expression. The background of the bottom section is dark with streaks of light and small red sparkles.

**“TCH!” 2V
MADE SEVERAL
MANA BALLS
APPEAR
AROUND HER
BODY, AND TRIED
TO
CONTROL THEM
WITH A WAVE OF
HER HAND.**

“RAAAHHH!”



Character Introduction

JUNKO HATTORI

.....
A pure-hearted class rep who's in love with Akuto. Unable to hide her shock at Akuto's words.

AKUTO SAI

.....
Our "good" protagonist, who was prophesied (again?) to become the Demon King. How will he react to the revival of the first Demon King, Zero?

FUJIKO ETO

.....
A black mage and herbalist who swears loyalty to Akuto. Rides the demon beast Cerberus.

KEENA SOGA

.....
A ditzy airhead girl who's taken a liking to Akuto. Who is she, really?

MIWA HIROSHI

.....
A troublemaker who calls Akuto "Boss." He is also the hero "Brave."

KORONE

.....
A Liradan responsible for guarding and observing Akuto. But she has now been taken over by 2V and Zero.



YOSHIE KITA

Deceived by 2V, she helped bring Zero back to life. Likes Akuto and helps him.



LILY SHIRAISHI

Student Council President at Constant Magical Academy. Quick to fight and gets angry if called small.



2V

A member of Cabinet Magical Intelligence Department, aka CMID-8. Succeeded in bringing back Zero and using his power.



KEISU

A small girl found inside virtual phase space with Zero. Seems to be the key to defeating him?

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Prologue](#)

[1 - A New God?](#)

[2 - An Empire Controlled](#)

[3 - The Secret of the Demon King](#)

[4 - The Last Demon King](#)

[5 - Bloody Emperor](#)

[Afterword](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

Prologue

In this empire, the Emperor held no power at all. His only job was to live in a huge, beautiful palace in a forest at the center of the capital, and spend his life praying for the citizens of the Empire.

But the people of the Empire had always loved their rulers, and the current Emperor (or Empress, rather), Kazuko, was especially beloved. Special measures were taken to ensure that she maintained the form of a charming, beautiful young girl. Her mannerisms were artful and elegant, and every time she opened her mouth, her words were wise and insightful.

Thus, while Kazuko had no political power, she certainly did not lack for influence; a single word from her could drive the people to action. That was why there were careful restrictions on what she was allowed to publicly say, and careful measures were taken to ensure that her private life was kept from the public eye.

As a result, Kazuko had many secrets. Some of them were small, and some of them were big, but the biggest of them all was kept a secret even from the nation's high priests. The only ones who knew her secret were the highest ranking members of the royal guard, and a single young girl.

The secret was this: Kazuko had a twin. And of course, the young girl who knew it was her elder sister.

The Imperial family had a number of strange customs. One of them was that if the family ever gave birth to twins, the eldest was to lose her right of ascension to the throne, and be raised in secret to serve as a replacement for her younger sister, should it ever be needed. The imperial family's servants faithfully followed these rules, and raised Kazuko's older sister in a hidden room in the palace.

The elder sister was never even given a name, for she too was Kazuko.

"I'm Kazuko? But then, who is she?"

The young girl was looking out at a brightly lit room in the palace, holding a doll she'd been given as a toy. In that room was another girl with the same face as her, sitting at a tiny desk and being taught to read by her instructor.

"She is also Kazuko," the Liradan who took care of her said.

"But why am I not allowed to talk to her?"

"Because that's what the rules say."

"But why am I not allowed to study, like she is?"

"You will learn the things she studies very shortly. But all you'll have to do is use a machine. There will be no need for you to work hard or study."

"Hmmm... So it's easier for me, huh? But she has to work hard."

The girl laughed as she spoke. But later, when she grew up and began to understand more about the world around her, she learned just how unnatural her life was. At regular intervals, the Empress's memories would be transferred into her mind. She would believe, without the slightest doubt, that she was Empress Kazuko. But there was another Empress in the palace, one that she could only stare at. It was a strange feeling, one that nobody but her had ever experienced.

After a while, the girl ceased to understand at all who she was. To make matters worse, the girl was forbidden to communicate with anyone but a small group of Liradans. When she tried to escape from the carefully hidden room that made up her entire world, the Liradans would always find her and bring her back.

The girl had never spoken to anyone, but her counterpart, Empress Kazuko, interacted with any number of people at the palace daily. And all those memories were implanted in the girl — she knew the names and faces of all the world's leaders and the nation's high priests, but none of them had the slightest idea that she existed.

The girl had no one who could prove to her who she was. And in that respect, the Liradans were useless. Whenever she asked them, they could never give her a real answer to her question.

But the girl never went insane, and she never killed herself. The best medical technology in the world made sure of it. Regular injections of psychotropic drugs ensured her mental stability, and just like the real Kazuko, her body was altered to be exceptionally long-lived.

Her empty life went on and on, far longer than she would have wanted it to, and eventually, she stopped thinking about who she was. She was a creature of the shadows, ignored by everyone; the polar opposite of the Empress of the land of the rising sun.



Eventually she just stopped thinking about it, and just accepted that this was who she was. And in doing so, she ceased to think of herself as human, and began to think of herself as a kind of ghost. As a ghost, she spent her days looking down on the world from above. A formless observer, an empty vessel to be filled with data.

But all of that changed when she began to study magic.

When Empress Kazuko grew up and began to study magic, the young girl did as well. But their differing personalities resulted in them learning distinctly different kinds of magic. The Empress was able to master most magic easily, but the other Kazuko displayed very little talent. There was one spell, however, that she had a strange talent for: a secret magic possessed only by the imperial family, that almost no one else in the Empire had been able to master: the ability to possess the minds of multiple targets at once. Perhaps it came from the fact that she thought of herself as a ghost.

The girl devoted all her energies to mastering this strange magic, and eventually came to realize what an incredible power she possessed. She could take control of any number of mindless tools without even touching them, and if she limited herself to a single target, she could even take over a sentient Liradan.

Her only guards were Liradans — if she wanted to, she could escape. She was shocked and overjoyed when she realized this, and began to think about the best way to put an end to her imprisonment. But her joy faded in a matter of minutes.

There was nothing for her to do. She was no one. She wasn't even human. No one would ever give her a role to fulfill. By taking over a doll or a Liradan, she could become anybody she wanted. But there was no "real" her left that could go out into the outside world.

But that began to change when one of the dolls she used to observe the world outside found a strange man. The man didn't exist in any of the past data. He was no one, too. But he knew all sorts of very strange things, and while she'd never found out how he did it, he'd risen to the top of the magical intelligence organization known as CMID-8.

The girl decided to make contact with the man. She wasn't interested in his work, but she was interested in him.

The man called himself Boichiro Yamato. She told him the truth about who she was, and what her circumstances were, and he listened to her sincerely.

That was the day she decided to leave. She decided to join CMID-8, and moved her hideout from the palace to a small condominium.

That was the day the girl got a name of her own.

Her name was 2V.

1 - A New God?

After the students returned from Virtual Phase Space, Constant Magical Academy was in a state of panic. Korone, the Liradan that served as Akuto Sai's observer, had suddenly shot him with a cannon.

The compact laser beam she'd fired from the beam weapon she kept in her bag was powerful enough to slice a human body in half; it was clearly an act of attempted murder.

To make matters worse, Akuto was injured. He'd been attacked by Zero in VPS, where he couldn't use his body's recovery abilities, and he was almost dead. An attack on him in such a state couldn't possibly be written off as one of Korone's frequent bad jokes.

All the students there were too shocked by her sudden action to move. Everybody had noticed there was something wrong with Korone, but it was also clear that there was something wrong with everything else, too. In the distance, below them in the city, they could see black towers of smoke rising up.

"Every Liradan in the city has gone out of control..." one of the students whispered as he looked at the breaking news displayed on his student handbook. "Then..."

All eyes turned to Korone. Everyone began to step away from her.

Korone was still holding her beam weapon at her side as she began to walk down the path the students made by backing away from her. At the end of the path, Akuto was lying on the ground. Keena Soga and Fujiko Eto were leaning over him with expressions of shock.

"Wh-What happened?"

"S-Stop it, Korone..."

But Korone didn't seem to hear them. She was still walking forward with the barrel of her gun pointed towards Akuto.

“I cannot kill humans. Please move to the side.”

Keena was shielding Akuto’s body from Korone as she leaned over, and this had evidently stopped her from firing.

Fujiko’s expression froze when she heard Korone’s words. “...It looks like she didn’t go crazy and lose control.”

“Is somebody controlling her, then?” Keena whispered. But there was nobody there to answer.

Korone walked up to the both of them silently, and looked down at them.

“C-Come on... If you can talk, tell us why you’re doing this!” Keena said with a quavering voice.

Korone put her gun back in her bag. For a moment, Keena smiled.

“W-Whew...”

But then Korone spoke again. “I am doing this in order to eliminate the current Demon King.”

Keena couldn’t speak. And then Korone took out a thin rod from her bag. Fujiko looked at it in terror; she knew immediately that it was a melee combat weapon. It was shaped like a sword, with a stick for a blade.

“This is a stun stick. It will enable me to remove any resistance without resorting to lethal measures. Resistance is not advised.” Korone ran her hand along the stun stick, and it lit up with electricity.

“Looks like we’ll have to fight...” There was sweat on Fujiko’s face. She’d just fought Korone inside VPS, even if it was just a game. She knew that if Korone was serious, she could move far faster than a human could react. “This... might be a problem.”

It was worse than a problem. It was a lethal situation. None of the other students would want to try to fight back against Korone. In a melee fight, the only other person she could count on was Junko Hattori, but when she finally saw the class rep in the corner of her eye, she seemed to be in some kind of state of shock.

“If I only had a moment’s opening, I might be able to do something...” Fujiko

tried to find an opening in Korone's movements, but failed.

"If you refuse to move, you will be eliminated." Korone raised the stun stick.

"No!" Keena clung tightly to Akuto's body. Fujiko closed her eyes, ready to face the end.

Just then, a shock wave violently shook the air around them.

"...What was that?" Fujiko opened her eyes and looked around.

Korone was frozen, her body twitching slightly. "Aaaaaaaaaaaaaa...." Her voice sounded like a broken tape recorder, and she wasn't moving at all.

Fujiko had no idea what had just happened, but this was just the distraction she needed.

"Cerberus!" she shouted.

A demon beast came bounding out from the school building in answer to her call. It was a huge dog monster, with three heads. She'd trained it before to listen to her commands, and now it was her favorite.

The beast picked up Akuto's body with one of its mouths, then jerked its head to flip him onto its back. Keena was still clinging tightly and refusing to let go, so she went with him. Fujiko leapt on the beast's back as well. She ordered the beast away from the schoolyard, but when she realized that Junko was still too shaken to move, she ordered the Cerberus to put her on its back too.

"Hyah!" The shock of being picked up by a giant dog mouth and flung upwards brought Junko back to her senses.

"Fujiko, what are we going to do now?" she asked as she looked into her eyes.

"We have to run. We still don't know what's going on. The only thing I can say with certainty right now is that this 'First Demon King' we saw inside the game is what made Korone go crazy." Fujiko started to make the Cerberus run from Korone.

"Wh-Where are we going to run to? Ackie's tough, but he'll need time to get better, right?" Keena said, worried.

"We don't have a lot of options. Our best choice now is to go to one of the

black mages' hidden villages." She said "now," but the tone of her voice made it clear that she'd been planning on this for a while.

"Hidden villages?" Keena asked, surprised.

"That's right. There's a spot where some of the black mages I've been dealing with make their home. It's a little out of the way, but that's what makes it a perfect place for us to hide."

Junko raised her voice in objection. "Fujiko, that sounds like you're admitting he's the Demon King..."

"Of course I am," Fujiko said, as if she was surprised there was any question about it at all.

Junko looked uncertain. "I don't know if that's what's best for him..."

"We're not in a position to worry about that now. If every Liradan in the country is under that thing's control, the whole empire's been taken over."

Junko didn't seem to have anything to say in response to that.

"And if it has, the only ones who can fight back are the black mages. We're rebels anyway." Fujiko grinned. Then she turned to look behind the Cerberus. "We don't have time to talk about it, either."

Korone had recovered, and was skating across the ground towards them.

"Tch... But even if that's true, I can't go to a black mage village..." Junko said, pained at the thought. She looked from the unconscious Akuto to behind them, then back again. After glancing over and over at Akuto, she looked sad for a moment, and then jumped off of the Cerberus's back.

"I'll hold off Korone!"

"...If we get separated here, I won't be able to tell you where the village is!" Fujiko said as Junko began to recede into the distance.

But Junko didn't look back.

"Get out of here!" She raised her katana up high.

Meanwhile, Korone skated closer and closer.

"Yah!" With a short cry, Junko brought down her sword.

But in the next instant, Korone's stun stick landed square on her stomach. There was a sharp sound of crackling electricity.

"Gwah!" Junko grunted and passed out cold.

From the Cerberus's back, Keena gasped in surprise at Korone's merciless blow. "Even if she was serious, normally Korone would tell a joke right now...!"

Korone knocked Junko out without a single sarcastic remark, however, and continued to follow after them. She was moving faster than the dog could run, and before long she was right at its tail.

"But this time, I can fight back!" Fujiko raised her hand to cast a spell.

But then she lowered it, confused. The mana wasn't coming to her hand.

"What? My magic..."

"You can't use it?" Keena asked in surprise.

"Have the gods gone out of control too...?" Fujiko gasped just as Korone jumped up, holding her stun stick out as she attacked from above.

"Fine then...!" Fujiko tried to use the code for black magic — magic that wasn't controlled by the gods — but Korone was just a little bit faster. "I won't make it in time...!"

Fujiko's eyes went wide with fear, but then the same strange phenomenon struck Korone again. Her body began to vibrate, and she fell from the sky like she'd suddenly passed out.

"Again? I'm glad it saved me, but... what just happened?" Fujiko asked, when suddenly the Cerberus began to drop in speed. "What's wrong?" Fujiko looked forward again to see Keena pointing to the front.

"There's someone there..." Keena said. On the hill away from the school, where the Cerberus had fled to, there was a single girl standing. She held some sort of box in her hands.

"Who is it?" Fujiko tensed up for a fight, but the girl waved as if she recognized them.

"You're Fujiko Eto, right? If you're running away, can you let me on? I'll

explain later,” the girl said cheerfully.

Fujiko looked suspicious for a second, of course, but when she heard the girl — Yoshie Kita — say her next words, her mouth fell open in surprise.

“I’m sure this will come as a surprise, but this isn’t our first meeting. I was Yoshihiko inside the game.” “...So that was what happened, then?” Fujiko nodded, satisfied, and let her on the Cerberus. She turned her eyes towards the box that Yoshie was holding. There was a cord coming out of it connected to an antenna that was pointing towards Korone.

“This came with the VPS generator I used. It was supposed to be a way to vibrate the mana in the air to make a barrier, but I made some quick adjustments to make it directional,” Yoshie explained.

“So wherever you point that thing, the mana will vibrate and keep anyone in its path from moving, huh?” Fujiko said.

Yoshie nodded. “That’s right. It looks like the gods aren’t giving anyone permission to use magic, but machines work just fine. So this is all we can count on right now. But I can only use it a little at a time, or the machine will just overheat and burn out. All it can do is buy us some time...”

While Yoshie sighed, Fujiko just smiled. “As long as you can buy us a little time with it, we can get away. I’m no machine, but I’ve got magic I can use without the help of the gods. I can use black magic.”

“Woooah! That’s great. I’m counting on you, then!” Yoshie clapped her hands together.

Fujiko grinned and said,

“You make it sound easy, but it’s not....*Bring the darkness of my heart to the world!*”

Fujiko chanted the words to focus her mind, and a dark aura flowed out from her body into the surrounding air. No, it looked like an aura, but it was black mana. The mana was warping the light around her, and making it look like it was pitch black. The dark cloak of mana quickly spread out over a hundred-meter radius.

“We can use this to hide on the mountain behind the school until she’s gone,” Fujiko said, satisfied.

“That’s amazing! I’m so impressed!” Yoshie cheered.

Fujiko sighed and shrugged her shoulders. “...You’re a lot different than you were inside the game.”

“Aww, you know what roleplaying is, right? I tried to act like a character in a reverse harem game.”

“A reverse harem game...? The ones where the player is constantly surrounded by handsome boys?”

“Oh? Are you a fan?”

“...No. But yes, if you’re that game’s creator, it would explain a lot...” Fujiko commented. “But that doesn’t matter now. Can you explain to me what’s going on?”

○

At the same time as Fujiko and the others were beginning their escape, a car was traveling down the streets of the Imperial Capital’s city core. 2V had fled from Lily Shiraishi’s attack successfully, and had one of the members of CMID-8 pick her up.

The voice of the man in the front seat was quavering with surprise. “Twins?!” It was a calm-looking older man who wore glasses and a scientist’s lab coat. He didn’t look like the type to ever sound like that, so what he heard must have been truly shocking.

“That’s right. Kazuko and I are twins.” 2V said, grinning.

She looked like a pale, sickly young girl, but if that were true, she must actually have been very old. But she didn’t seem to be lying, or crazy. The driver — whose name was Sage — realized that if she didn’t look so pale or sickly, she would look exactly like the current Empress.

Sage realized that this was actually the first time he’d seen 2V’s face.

“And nobody knows this?”

“Nobody but me and her. The head of the royal guard too, maybe. They need to make sure I don’t come back to the palace. But anyway, most people don’t know. The doctors who treated me probably had their memories erased. It’s a pain to deal with, honestly,” 2V said, sounding quite unconcerned.

“Is this some way to stop twins from struggling over the line of succession?”

“Nope. It seems like it’s just the rule. One twin is raised as the other’s double. That’s just how the imperial family works, I guess. And that’s why they trained me until I gained this power. Until the now dearly-departed leader of CMID-8 hired me, I dedicated my life to the service of the Empire. Hahaha...” she laughed loudly.

“Is that why you revived the first Demon King, Zero?” Sage looked outside the window. There was a bitter tone in his voice. The city was in the midst of a huge disaster. He could see smoke rising up from between the gaps in the buildings which was probably from where a flying car had fallen from the sky. He’d seen a lot of surface cars, like the one they were driving, crash along the road.

This was what it meant for the Liradans to temporarily lose control. In this era, most driving, and a lot of physical labor, was done by Liradans. He couldn’t even imagine how many accidents were taking place at the factories.

“Zero can control every Liradan. He’s the perfect partner for me. The chaos was only temporary, too. I’ve regained control. There’ll be no more disasters after this.”

“I prepared a vessel for Zero, just like you asked, to keep the disasters from spreading further. I’ll ask this again. What is Zero?”

“The first Liradan, and the first Demon King, it would seem. Liradans are artificial intelligences who were created to control mankind.”

“...Created before the gods, huh?’ Sage whispered. “Artificial intelligences that control humanity” was a perfect way to describe the gods, too.

“Zero began with the goal of maximizing human happiness, and for some reason ended up with the conclusion that they all had to be wiped out.”

“How did that happen?’

“We can do interviews with him now, so I’ll ask. He’s pretty busy now, so it won’t be for a while. Either way, the problems with Zero were quickly solved, and the gods were created. And that’s how the first Demon King war began.”

“So that’s what the first war between the Demon King and the gods was?”

“It was a battle between Liradans and human magic. The battle itself never reached that large a scale, and it ended with Zero being sealed away.”

“I get that he was sealed... but why wasn’t he destroyed?”

“That’s the key, you see. In the simplest terms, Zero is the core of their minds. If they lose Zero, they’ll quite likely cease to exist.”

“So it all started with Zero, huh?”

“He’s also the first Liradan, so he’s actually the founder of our society. But a tool’s still a tool; that’s why I can control him. And that makes me the strongest person in the world. I hate to steal the title from CMID-8’s Codename USD, though. It used to belong to them.” 2V’s face twisted with laughter.

The USD she was talking about was none other than Sage. He, however, seemed unperturbed by this, and calmly adjusted his glasses.

“So you’re going to start a rebellion.”

“Nope. I’m taking over. From now on, I’ll be Kazuko. Just watch and see how I rule.”

Sage glanced back at 2V for a short instant. There was something like murder in his eyes.

“I know you’re not the ambitious type. What even brought this on?”

2V’s exhausted eyes stared back at him for a moment, before she raised her lips into a smile.

“I get it. If I give you a boring answer, you and I are enemies. But I know for a fact that you’re going to love what I tell you. You see, I want to prove that everyone except me is insane. Isn’t that a fascinating experiment?” There was a brilliant smile on her sunken cheeks. Between the smile and her dead eyes, it seemed that if anyone was crazy, it was her. But her words and her expression were carefully calculated, and carefully controlled.

Sage opened his mouth a little, and then closed it. This seemed to have caught him off guard.

“Everyone but you, you say?”

“That’s right. Everyone in the world. Once I’m Empress, I’ll make them all go mad with only a few words. But I believe that’s just what you need to save the world, you see. I’m going to strip away all the empty trappings they use to cover themselves, and show them how much they truly desire chaos and violence.” 2V laughed aloud.

“I see. I won’t be able to help you with that, I’m afraid, but I will watch and see what you do. If you think you can pull something off at that scale, then try it. I’ll look forward to seeing who is victorious — you, or someone else — someone sane, that is.”

Sage stopped the car. He opened the door. They were in front of the park surrounding the imperial palace. 2V stepped out, and saw a long row of Liradans waiting for her. It was the palace’s Liradan staff. They were all dressed in formal servant’s clothing, lined up to welcome their new master, 2V.

The entire palace, surrounded by a forest in the middle of the huge capital, was now 2V’s.

“Did you capture the Empress... capture Kazuko?” 2V asked one of the closer Liradans

“No. The Empress was not at the palace.” the Liradan said.

“So she ran?”

“Yes. But she is alone. We captured everyone else in the palace.”

“Hmph. Then if I go inside, they might just think she came back. Given the circumstances, even if they think it’s suspicious, they’ll still have no choice but to assume I’m real.” 2V chuckled and looked up at the top of the palace.

There was a strange sight unfolding above. A huge object, a polygon with at least 20 sides, and so many edges and facets that it almost looked like a sphere, was floating there. The object was around 20 meters in diameter. It was hard to tell if it was transparent or silver, but its slick, wet, metallic surface reflected its

surroundings as it gave off a light too bright to stare at.

It was Zero's body.

"The body of a god, with its own VPS inside, huh? That must've cost a fortune to make."

2V turned back to the car and waved, and Sage raised a hand to wave back and then drove off. When he was gone, 2V began to walk past the row of Liradans as she looked up at Zero again.

Zero was her slave, now. The magic she'd learned as a member of the imperial family made that possible. She was the one person on Earth who could use that spell, and it gave her absolute power.

Silently, she gave an order to Zero. A giant image appeared in the air above the palace.

It was Kazuko — though of course, it wasn't the real Kazuko. It was a fake that Zero made. But its appearance and its voice were identical in every respect. The words it spoke, however, belonged to 2V.

"I grieve for the accidents that took place today..." Kazuko began to speak.

The image was broadcast all over the empire. First, 2V explained that what had happened was Zero's fault, and explained who he was and what he could do. Then she explained to the citizens that they should not try to resist.

The gods weren't working right now, which meant that no one could use magic. The Liradans were all under Zero's control. Their only choice was to obey.

This was, in a sense, a de facto surrender. Once her declaration of surrender was finished, this time 2V spoke in Zero's voice. It was the mechanical, terrifying voice of a man.

"The gods are dead. However, it matters not. Abandon your magic. The Liradans shall become the tools I use to serve you. And in doing so, I shall grant you eternal happiness under my rulership. I am your new god," Zero (or rather, 2V) said.

2V cackled and stepped through the palace gate.

The Empire was now under her control.

○

A week passed since 2V's takeover. There'd been a lot of confusion, of course, but the people had quickly gotten used to life without magic.

All public services were handled by the Liradans. The churches were dismantled, and the priests became unemployed. The knights were reorganized under Liradan command, and now took Liradan orders. Most companies were placed under Liradan control as well.

Of course, the unemployment level had skyrocketed. But even without jobs, the people had no trouble surviving. Most all the services and products needed to keep society running were provided by Liradan hands, and now there was no need for humans to work at all. You could do nothing, and still get a good salary.

—But it all feels so empty...

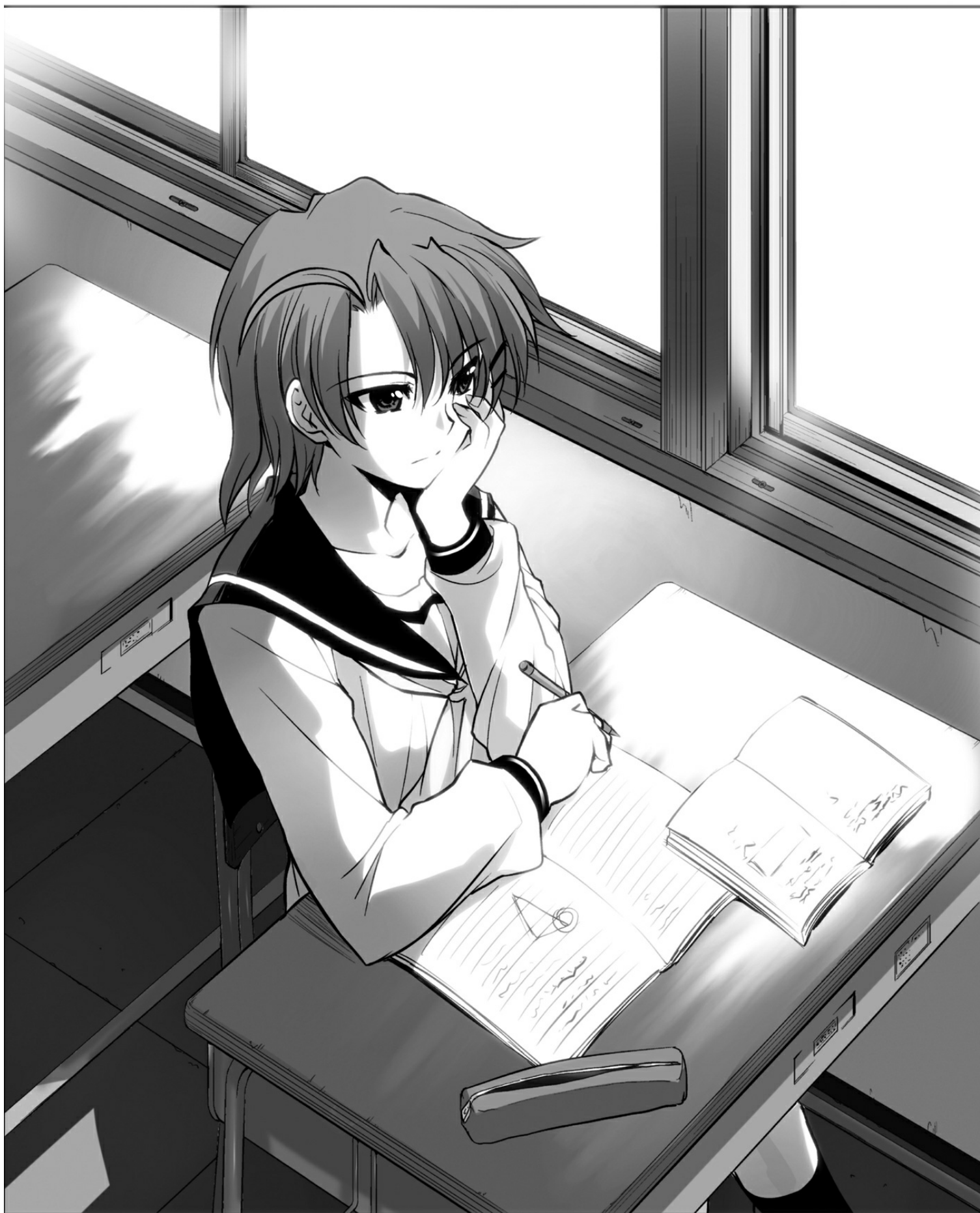
Junko thought as she sat in a corner of the classroom.

Constant Magical Academy had been shut down. The students were all allowed to choose another school to go to. Most of them got to go where they wanted, but no one school was allowed to take in too many.

Junko was now in the middle of a new, normal life, surrounded by students she didn't know.

—Normal?

She wondered at the thought she'd just had. No, a long time ago, this was normal. You would go to school for no real reason, and just memorize the things you needed to know to avoid being a burden on society. But the only thing you were forced to learn was how to have the endurance to sit silently in class for hours.



Being quiet was more important than anything. And in this new society, the Liradans would even carry your food to your mouth if you let them, so the ability to “think about nothing” was even more important.

But none of the students around her had been students of magic. They seemed to welcome this new society.

“I ended up buying that guitar Myo-chan was using on TV last night.”

“Wow, are you stupid or something? Did you honestly buy something just because it was on TV?”

“Shut up. Once I learn to play it, I can finally get a girlfriend.”

“The Liradans can play it better than you, so probably not.”

“I can put more feeling into it, though. I’m gonna learn to play the guitar and make girls cry.”

She heard the boys talking during a break between classes. The only human-like things left for humans to do were art and self-expression, she realized, and the only point in doing them now was to try and impress a member of the opposite sex. She was so shocked she could barely breathe, but the boys didn’t seem to think anything of it.

—This is all we’ll ever have, forever...

Everyone knew that. There was no need to graduate. All there was to do was to eat, drink, and fall in love. She hadn’t been able to get a hold of them, but her parents had been relieved of their duties reconstructing Suhara’s shrine, and were more or less confined to their homes. Her life had become an endless trip between her dorm and her school.

“You look depressed. Want to go get parfaits after school?”

It was Korone who spoke to her. Her voice was far brighter than before, and there was an actual expression on her face. Her uniform was slightly untidy, and she looked just like a normal schoolgirl.

“...No, thanks.” Junko answered with a frown.

She still couldn’t get over the change in Korone, who was now the most

popular girl in class. Everyone loved her for her fun, cheerful nature.

“You’ll never get a boy like that, you know,” Korone said jokingly. “It’s a shame when you’re so cute.”

Junko had tried many times to get the old Korone back, but with no luck at all. Now it was Junko’s turn to be the class oddball.

“Sorry, I’m meeting my little sister today. But that doesn’t matter. I just want you to go back to being the old Korone...”

“The old Korone? I’m still Korone. I always have been. And you know, if you keep acting weird, they might arrest you. You know they’ve arrested a lot of people for being subversive lately, right?” Korone said, and then she ran off to join another group of friends. Junko saw an eerie light in her eyes just as she left.

She’d heard the rumors that there were people fighting back against Liradan control. She’d even seen a post online asking for people to join them, but the post had vanished before the day was out.

—Maybe something really bad is happening...

She had an unshakeable sense that something was wrong.

When school ended, she headed to the spot where she was supposed to meet her sister: beneath a big clock on a street corner near the school.

Her sister Yuko was an idol, a celebrity. Her face was well known enough that she’d be recognized if she went outside, so she was wearing a big hat. But what really surprised Junko was that somebody was standing next to her.

“Hiroshi!” Junko gasped in surprise.

Hiroshi waved at her awkwardly. “I ended up having some extra time, so I came by. It’s kind of embarrassing though, huh?”

“You weren’t there during that whole mess. Where have you been?”

“Sis, he ended up at school with me,” Yuko explained. She seemed really happy.

—Come to think of it, the two of them were oddly close.

She looked at the two of them as if she'd just realized something.

"That's fine, but is it okay if people see you together?" she said with a grin. Yuko smiled, but Hiroshi seemed to panic.

"D-Don't say stuff like that, Class Rep!"

"Don't worry, Hiroshi," Yuko laughed. "I don't worry about that stuff at all."

"I think you should," Junko said with a sigh.

"Th-That's right. You're really popular, and you need to remember that." Hiroshi still seemed to be fidgeting.

"Nah, I'm sure it's fine. The whole business has been really weird lately." Yuko frowned.

"Has it?"

"Yeah. It's like there's some kind of... pressure coming down from above. I don't really know how to describe it, but I don't like it. They tell you what you're allowed to say in advance, and there's starting to be more and more songs that you're not allowed to sing..." Yuko started to complain, but Hiroshi quickly put his hand behind their backs and gave both her and Junko a little push.

"C-Come on, let's find someplace to sit down. There's no point in standing here..."

They went inside a nearby coffee shop, where Junko and Yuko began to discuss the real reason they'd gathered. They were here to talk about their parents.

"So, are they okay?" Junko's voice dropped.

"Yeah. They haven't been hurt, but it looks like we won't be able to see them for a while. You see..." Yuko's voice trailed off when their tea arrived. The waitress was a Liradan, and Junko didn't like the way it was staring at them at all. Maybe she was just on edge because of everything that happened...

"How far are we really allowed to push it?" Junko whispered to herself.

"How far?" Yuko asked.

"How far can we push it before... they arrest us like the rumors say." Junko

continued. Hiroshi's face took on a serious expression, but Yuko just laughed.

"Oh, don't worry about it. Mom and Dad are just fine, right? So it can't be that bad."

"Y-Yeah..." Junko agreed, but something still didn't feel right. It had only been a week, but there was a strange, unpleasant feeling she could sense all around the city. Maybe people who didn't use magic on a daily basis wouldn't notice it, but there was a sense of being stifled, that it was hard to breathe.

But what really bothered her was that the people didn't seem to mind. Even Yuko didn't. Her parents were being essentially locked up, and she was still acting like it wasn't that big of a deal.

"But we've lost our freedom. Isn't it naïve to expect the person who stole it from us to have our best interests at heart?" Junko said.

Hiroshi quickly cut her off. "B-But we're more free now, in a way, right? We can do what we want without the gods bossing us around. Even the ability to use magic was almost too much responsibility for a person to have. Our new schools are so easy that we can get perfect grades without having to actually work, right? So now school's just a place to hang out with your friends." The smile on his face, however, was frozen.

"Don't you want to get smarter, though? And Yuko and I could be in danger at any time, so I don't think..." Junko kept going, but Hiroshi waved a hand for her to be quiet.

"Nah, there's no danger," he said.

Then Yuko cut in. "It'll be fine. If that happens, Hiroshi will protect me." She grabbed Hiroshi's arm and pushed herself up against it.

Hiroshi blushed and shook his head. "No, I'm not that strong. Don't do anything dangerous, please."

Junko hated herself a little for feeling more annoyed than pleased by her sister's happiness.

—It's still only been a week...

It had only been a week, but her old life had begun to feel very far away. The

horrible danger, the emotional outbursts, all the things she'd wanted to be rid of when they were happening to her, had all begun to feel sweet, like fond memories.

—And he was the one who brought them all to me, wasn't he?

Akuto was on her mind. Maybe she'd regret for the rest of her life not running away with him in those last moments. Now she didn't know if she'd ever see him again.

—But he doesn't care about me...

It had been a huge shock to her when he'd told her to spend more time with Yoshihiko inside the game. She didn't want to admit it, but that was the reason she'd leapt off the Cerberus's back.

—But maybe I should've stayed with him, no matter what the cost?

She let out a low sigh.

"Sis, you okay?"

Yuko's voice brought her back to reality.

"I-I'm fine. It's nothing. I just think it's not safe to relax so much," Junko said as she coughed and shook her head.

"Aww, fine. I get it. I'll make sure I keep in touch," Yuko said as she swallowed her tea and turned to Hiroshi. "You've still got time after this, right? There's someplace I want to go with you."

"S-Sure. As long as I'm not out too late," Hiroshi replied.

"What? You're not a kid anymore. You don't even live in a dorm anymore. You've got your own apartment, right?"

"Y-Yeah, that's true. But I'm a little busy today..."

"Fine. I'll just make sure you don't get home too late, then."

Hiroshi and Yuko were already in the middle of their own conversation, so Junko awkwardly scooted her seat backwards.

"I think it's time for me to get going," she said.

“Yeah. I’ll call you if anything comes up. Make sure you watch when I’m on the air, okay?” Yuko replied. Junko left a happy-looking Yuko and a slightly stammering Hiroshi, and headed back to her room at her dorm. There was barely anything in the room except the bare necessities she needed to live. She sat down.

The only form of entertainment she had was internet streaming. She could communicate with anyone she wanted online, but the only people she knew well enough to talk to were the people she’d studied magic with. And talking about anything political would invite attention she didn’t want.

As she watched the news, only half paying attention, she began to feel like she was going insane. The news was so much more peaceful than it had been before. There was no news about any crimes, just stuff about sports and food. Maybe there wasn’t any crime anymore.

Some of the Liradans weren’t made to be beautiful, but made to look identical to humans. She’d heard stories about them stopping crimes before they happened, or arresting people immediately afterwards. If that was true, it would mean that humanity was being watched it all times.

—If I keep watching this, I’m going to go insane.

She turned off the news, but now there was nothing left to do but sit in a quiet room.

—I wish... I could just talk to somebody about how I really feel.

But the only person she wanted to talk to was Akuto.

—Am I just... regretting that I didn’t go with him?

Just like Fujiko had said, she may never see him again. As she sat there in the silence, thinking about that, her face began to feel strange. She put a hand up to it, and it was wet.

—I didn’t even realize... I’ve been crying...

Nobody was watching, but she still felt horribly embarrassed.

—Did I really care about him that much?

And at the same time, she started to feel pathetic.

—Then why don't I just tell him? Why can't I do that? Why do I keep screwing it up?

Junko looked up to keep herself from crying more.

—Is this the end of everything?

○

Hiroshi had transferred to a school without a dorm, and ended up living in an apartment instead. He'd spent enough time with Yuko that day that when he got back, it was early evening. When he entered the room, there was a girl standing in the back, watching him with sharp eyes.

She was short, and tomboyish, but her expression was one of a person used to command, and her first words to Hiroshi were an insult.

"You're late, idiot! I thought something had happened. You need to be more careful."

It was former student council president Lily Shiraishi. After 2V had escaped, she'd managed to defeat the dolls with Hiroshi's help. But with Zero holding the empress hostage, and the gods under his command, there was nothing for her to do but flee and hide.

Fortunately, they'd managed to keep it a secret that Hiroshi had regained the suit given to him by Yamato Boichiro. The suit's mana canceller had stopped that information from getting to Zero. After that, they'd decided to hide in Hiroshi's apartment.

"I can't help it. I've got a life to live, you know." Hiroshi sighed and turned on the light, only to freeze in shock.

Lily was sitting cross-legged on the floor, naked except for her underwear. Hiroshi quickly averted his eyes.

"P-Put some clothes on...!" he stammered.

"Stop acting like a horny teenager. I'm washing my clothes right now, idiot," Lily sighed. She didn't seem to even think of Hiroshi as a member of the opposite sex, because she didn't show the slightest sign of embarrassment.

"Then put some of my clothes on while you wait!"

“I’m not wearing your clothes. It would go against my sense of aesthetics.

“And your sense of aesthetics lets you sit around in your underwear?”

“If you don’t find your own body aesthetically pleasing, it means you need to train harder,” Lily said.

Hiroshi glanced at her, a little confused. “I mean, you’re not fat, but you’re not very feminine...”

Lily’s eyes flashed, and her left hand shot out as she remained seated. She sat there for a moment, before standing up like she’d remembered something.

“That’s right... I’m not used to the fact that I can’t use magic yet.”

She walked over to Hiroshi, stretched herself as tall as she could, and then grabbed Hiroshi’s face with her right hand. “Owowwoww!”

“Shut up. It’s all some people can do to maintain the body they were born with, you know.”

“I get it. I get it, so let go!”

“Sheesh... I would’ve preferred to share an apartment with a more manly man, anyway.” Lily took a step away.

“Like the boss?” Hiroshi said, rubbing his face. Of course, he meant Akuto.

Lily’s lips curled up into a grin. “Heh. It might be fun to have a relationship with a man I’ll want to kill someday,” she said, sounding far more grown-up than her body looked.

Hiroshi stood there for a moment, uncertain of what to say.

“Anyway,” Lily said, eventually deciding to change the subject, “you’re all I’ve got now. I need a little more manly spirit out of you.”

Hiroshi’s expression tightened. “I know that. We can’t use magic now. Which means our only weapon is my suit, right?”

“Right. You have to be my messenger, now that I’m stuck in here.” Lily turned the computer she was holding to face him. “So, what did you learn about who 2V really is?”

Hiroshi transferred the data from his student handbook into the computer

and said, “There’s limits to what I can find out on my own, but one of your dad’s old workers passed me the data. Just like we thought, the Kazuko that issued the surrender proclamation was computer-generated. It wasn’t really her.”

“So the rumors that the current empress is a little different are true, then. It definitely looks like a healthier 2V.” Lily still seemed skeptical, though.

“But even if she did have Zero’s help, the only way she could’ve taken over the palace that easily is if she was related to the Empress. If we assume it’s true, a lot of things make sense,” Hiroshi said.

Lily crossed her arms. “Yeah, that’s the thing. But what does she do now, then? If I were her, I’d be looking to either kill the real Kazuko, or kill us... But she doesn’t seem to be doing much at all.”

“Yeah. I expected to run into more trouble by now. If Empress Kazuko is dead, which is a possibility, that would just give her more reason to want to kill you. You know her secret.”

“But all she’s doing is getting rid of anti-government forces and black mages. That means she’s after Akuto.”

“It just doesn’t make sense, does it...?” Hiroshi fell silent for a moment, lost in thought.

“But whatever the reason, it’s perfect for us. We can kill 2V and our problems are solved. That’s where you come in. I’ll work with the priests to come up with a plan of attack for the palace. I just need you to be my messenger boy.” Lily tapped him on the shoulder.

Hiroshi just sighed. “All you care about is killing 2V. Why not take it easy for a while? Relax, try and look cute for once?”

Lily’s face broke into a grin. It wasn’t a cute smile, though — it was the smile of a veteran warrior. “I can be cute when I need to. But she shut down my school, and she’s taken over Arnul, one of my Liradans. There’ll be plenty of time to be cute when she’s dead.”

Hiroshi took a step away from her. “I-I get it. I won’t ask for cute. Just stop scaring me all the time.”

“Quiet. If I stopped, you’d try to sneak into my bed,” she said.

“You say that, but you’re the one who’s stolen my covers... If I did sneak into your bed, it would be just so I could stop freezing at night,” Hiroshi sighed.

“Fine. You can have one of the smaller blankets back. If you wrap it around your stomach instead of trying to use it as a blanket, it might actually keep you warm,” Lily said, strangely confident.

“...Even if we’re not boyfriend and girlfriend, I’d thought that living with a girl would be a little more fun...” Hiroshi sighed, but Lily just ignored him.

“I said quiet. If you can’t cook dinner, go buy me something from the convenience store. Don’t just buy two dinners, or they’ll know there’s two people here.”

2 - An Empire Controlled

“It’s a lot of fun being out in the mountains, huh? I never thought of myself as an outdoors person, but if you think of it like an RPG, it’s a pretty otaku-ish hobby, isn’t it?” Yoshie said happily.

“Yeah, it does feel like a video game. You need to gather equipment and use it at the right time, and even craft and gather sometimes,” Keena said cheerfully.

“You two need to take this a little more seriously,” Fujiko sighed.

They’d been in the mountains for two days. It would take them three to get to the black mage village that Fujiko remembered.

During their escape, they’d stopped to pick up camping equipment and other necessities from places that the Liradans hadn’t yet started guarding. Between that, and Fujiko’s ability to use black magic, they were able to escape without a trace.

Since they’d had plenty of time to talk, Yoshie had gotten Fujiko up to speed. But even putting what both of them knew together, they couldn’t figure out Zero’s secret. They’d seen Kazuko’s speech, but that was all the information they had. The two of them were more concerned, however, with Keisu.

“I think that Liradan is the key to everything, honestly.”

“So you’re saying the only thing that can seal Zero away again is this little Liradan named Keisu that you met inside VPS?”

“Yup. That’s why Zero should be after her as well.”

“He’ll look for Keisu while he searches for us.”

“Ideally we’d find her first, but... where is she?”

“She entered VPS a long time ago. There’s no telling where she manifested when she left.”

And so they decided that the goal of their journey while they escaped would be to give Akuto time to recover, and then find Keisu.

Akuto was still unconscious. His wounds would have killed a lesser man, and without a chance to rest somewhere, he wasn't going to get better.

"But... why is Zero so intent on killing Akuto? If Zero is the first Demon King, then I'm not even sure what a Demon King is anymore," Fujiko said, puzzled.

"It's possible that he's only looking at the bad parts of human history. Not that it's a possibility I want to think about. If what you guys heard earlier is true, the Demon King's job is to give humanity a temporary death to make it evolve, right? I like that, it's mythological," Yoshie said calmly.

Fujiko was beginning to understand that Yoshie had the personality of a cheerful mad scientist. Another way to phrase that would be "just an otaku," though.

"That's the opposite of what Zero is doing. But either way, Akuto is trying to rid himself of that fate and follow his own path. So he'll be fine," Fujiko said.

Yoshie's eyes started to shine. "Woah! I love it! It's like humanity's willpower overcomes all! He's the Demon King, but also the savior of humanity? Ooh! So he's like, got to control his evil dark side and stuff? That's so exciting!"

Fujiko frowned. "U-Um... can you please not go into your own little world there?"

Yoshie scratched her head, embarrassed. "Sorry, I live for this stuff. It's my hobby. Hey, do you want to come up with a name for our group? How about 'Maidens of Freezing Flame'? I like that name," Yoshie said.

—H-Her tastes stopped maturing in middle school!

Fujiko was astonished.

"You see, a Demon King who's the savior of humanity is a contradiction, like a freezing flame! You know, you're cool, and Keena's a redhead," Yoshie said, still cheerful.

Fujiko let out a little groan. But then Keena joined in.

"I like it! Yeah, that's what we need!"

"N-No. We don't need it. We don't need anything like that at all. C-Come on, we'll be there early in the morning, so let's go to sleep early tonight," Fujiko

said, but Keena and Yoshie kept chattering away happily for a while after that.

Fujiko finally got to sleep a few hours later, but she had a dream of strange and impenetrable words.

—*Ugh. Instincts of Burning Heat, Gravitational Sacrifice, Lonely Gale, Mad Archangel, Eternal Moonlight...*

In the morning, however, her luck improved. There were people in the village who recognized her, and she was welcomed warmly. If anything, they seemed about ready to throw a party when they saw Akuto.

“I never thought I’d get to see the Demon King in person!” the villagers all said.

It was a tiny village, just a few farms in the wilderness, but there was a wide range of ages. That was proof enough that this was a black mage village. If it was an ordinary one, the young people would’ve left long ago. Everyone here had something holding them together.

The party was invited to stay in the village elder’s house. Akuto was given a bed to rest in, and the rest were given tea and snacks to relax.

The “elder” was a middle-aged man with a quiet demeanor, a wife and kids, and a large Japanese-style house.

“Things are getting bad out there, huh?” he said as he watched the news on his terminal.

There was nothing at all about any trouble in the city. No crime meant that either information was being censored, or that society was under total control. “It’s the death of freedom,” Fujiko whispered.

He nodded. “To people like us, who’ve spent our whole lives trying to make magic free for everybody, it’s a terrible thing. Society’s going backwards.”

“I believe our only hope is Akuto, but even once he’s recovered, we won’t know what to do,” Fujiko said. “Can you lend us your wisdom, Elder?”

The elder thought for a moment, and then shook his head. “That’s a tough question. I know more about the history of the black mages than most, but I’ve never heard of any ‘first Demon King’ that sealed the gods.”

“Then what makes him different than Akuto and the other Demon Kings?”

“I can’t tell you that, either. I thought you would know, Eto.”

“Me?”

“The villagers assumed that the Demon King knew everything.”

“No... Nobody knows the details. All we know is the relationship between the gods and the Demon King...” Fujiko sighed. At this rate, they’d be forced to flee in total ignorance.

“I’m sorry I can’t help. I thought the Demon King had gone back to the place where he was born, though.”

Fujiko suddenly looked up. “The place he was born? What do you mean?”

The Elder raised an eyebrow in confusion. “You don’t know the legend? The Demon King fled from the land where he was born, and lived among the normal people as an orphan. So when he visits the place he was born, he’s supposed to receive all kinds of wisdom...”

“But Akuto said he doesn’t know where he was born.”

“That’s a problem, then. It means nobody knows. If only there were some clue...”

“I’ll look for it. Akuto can probably tell me something when he wakes up.”

“You’re right. Get some rest. Our magic conceals us from the government’s sensors, and the gods are given false records of the lives of the people who live here. So it’s safe.”

“That’s a huge help,” Fujiko said, lowering her head gratefully.

The elder brought the conversation to an end and suggested the three of them take a bath. They were covered in dirt after their trip through the mountains, so they happily took the towels offered by the elder’s wife and headed for the bath. Suddenly, however, Yoshie stopped. “You know, I’d like to wash Akuto before we take a bath,” she said. The elder’s wife apologized for not thinking of that herself, and brought them a small bucket of water and a towel.

“Oh, but can you do it yourselves? Should I call one of the men?” she asked, but Yoshie waved her away.

Fujiko answered in a loud voice as well. “We’ll be fine. I’m always by Akuto’s side to serve him!”

The elder’s wife nodded and left, but Yoshie seemed confused.

“You are? You certainly haven’t seemed to be so far.”

“Hmph. You’re just saying that because you don’t know about the strong bond between us.” Fujiko glared at her.

Yoshie cleared her throat. “Um, anyway, it was my idea, so I’ll be the one to do it, okay?”

An evil light flashed in Fujiko’s eyes. “You will NOT. It’s my job to take care of Akuto! You know that!”

“I do NOT know that. I-I know what you’re up to. You’re going to do something naughty, aren’t you?” Yoshie said stubbornly.

Fujiko moved directly in front of her, with a look on her eyes that would electrocute a mouse. “That’s a horrible thing to insinuate. I simply want Akuto to be clean when he wakes up...”

“But that was my idea,” Yoshie insisted, as the two of them glared at each other from across the bucket.

“I bet *you’re* the one who wants to do something naughty, aren’t you?”

“I do *not*. It just occurred to me that if I washed his body down, Akuto would feel like he’d gone to heaven. You know, like feel really great?”

“And that’s what I mean by something naughty!”

“You’re imagining things.”

“We’re not getting anywhere. I’m just going to go do it myself!”

Fujiko quickly soaked her towel in the water, wrung it out, and then went to open the sliding door to Akuto’s room.

“No, I said I was going to do it!” Yoshie pulled on Fujiko’s skirt, and Fujiko let out a short scream and fell onto the tatami mat.

“W-What are you doing?” Fujiko looked back up at her, her chest pressed against the floor. Her skirt had been pulled down to her knees, and now her butt was sticking up high in the air. For once, she actually blushed. She tried to put her skirt back on, but the hook was broken. “W-What did you just do?”

“Sorry, sorry. but I guess you can’t go wash Akuto dressed like that. I’ll do it for you.” Yoshie grabbed the wet towel out of Fujiko’s hands.

“Argh! Not happening!” Fujiko grabbed the towel and yanked hard.

“Uwaa!” Yoshie was pulled down onto the tatami.

“That’s what you get! That’s what you get! Now, all I have to do is open this sliding door, and Akuto and I can go to heaven together!”

Fujiko tried to crawl forward, but this time Yoshie grabbed her underwear to pull her back.

“You know I can’t let you do that.”

“Let go of me, damn it!” Fujiko began to flail her limbs around.

“Okay, but we’re going to do it together, then.” Yoshie said, hoping to at least end the argument, but Fujiko shook her head.

“Together? Impossible!”

“What? Why not?” Yoshie replied. “It’ll be a lot more fun with both of us there.”

“No! We can’t do that! It’s too perverted!”

“Perverted... We’re just wiping the dirt off him, right?”

“You really don’t get it, do you? Akuto and I are going to do all kinds of wonderful things together...”

“I knew it! You *are* planning on doing something naughty!”

“Maybe I am, but that’s none of your business! And for another thing, I don’t think you could do it without hurting him anyway! You’ve never even touched a real man, have you?”

Yoshie frowned. That had upset her. “Maybe I haven’t, but if I can practice, it’ll go just fine. Here, I’ll prove it on you.” Yoshie grabbed Fujiko again.

“W-What are you doing...?”

“Proving I know how to wipe somebody’s body down. I bet you’re nice and dirty from our walk through the mountains too, right?” Yoshie slipped the wet towel under Fujiko’s shirt.

“Hyah! S-Stop that!”

“I’m just wiping you down, that’s all.”

“Y-You don’t have to move the towel around like that, though!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m just cleaning you up. You don’t want me to be too rough, right? Or I’ll injure the skin. So I just need to be real soft...”

“Aah!”

“See? I know how to do it. Hehehe...” Yoshie let out a little chuckle.

Fujiko’s face turned red as she tried to struggle out of Yoshie’s grasp, but she couldn’t get free.

“I-I get it! I get it! Just let me go...”

“Nope! You really are all dirty, so I need to clean you up first.”

“Th-That tickles, though... Hyah! Y-You don’t need to unhook my bra!”

“It’s hard to clean you unless I do though, right? I need to be extra gentle around your most sensitive spots...”

“N-No! Not there! I mean it!”

Fujiko kept struggling and trying to get away, but Yoshie’s hands began to move about her body, touching her right where she needed to be touched. Fujiko turned red and sweaty, and started to moan. Yoshie’s breath was getting hot and heavy too as she enjoyed watching Fujiko’s reactions, when...

“Ackie! You’re awake!”

They suddenly both looked up when they heard Keena’s voice. The sliding door was open, and Akuto was sitting up in bed as Keena hugged him.

“Oops... I forgot about her. How did this happen, anyway?”

“It happened because of YOU!” Fujiko screamed.

○

“Another week’s gone by... Time flies, I guess.”

Lily was wearing a unisex t-shirt and underwear that Hiroshi had bought her, as she ate sardines from a can and watched the data scroll by on her terminal.

“I’m exhausted... The suit’s mana canceler protects me, but I still have to be really careful when I’m doing something,” Hiroshi sighed.

Another week had passed since Lily had moved in. With Hiroshi acting as messenger, and the rebel army’s plan to invade the palace was proceeding, but the load on Hiroshi was starting to wear him down.

“I do feel bad for making you work so hard. But fighting without magic is a lot harder than we thought. We want to make it so that the only people who have to fight are you and 2V,” Lily said.

Hiroshi knew she was right, so he had no choice but to obey. But that didn’t make him any less tired. “I know that, but...it’s getting a little tough.”

“You’ll just have to deal with it. You know this is important, right? If we want our old lives back, this is our only choice,” Lily reminded him. “We’re almost through this, and if you work hard, we can get a few more weapons. We can surround the palace with priests and soldiers, equipped with older weapons that don’t rely on magic. We’re lucky — the palace’s security isn’t particularly tight. And once the fight starts, we know the knights will join our side. When everything’s ready, we’ll be able to give that bitch hell. Until then, just hang in there.”

“Yeah... I know, but...” Hiroshi whispered, still annoyed.

Things were getting worse lately. Of course, 2V’s new laws were at fault, but what was really exhausting Hiroshi was that nobody seemed to really mind.

“Everybody’s out there just living their lives. It really makes you think. Sometimes I wonder if nobody wants us to do this. Or if we’re the ones who are in the wrong.”

“That’s what the oppressor always wants you to think. No matter how much

you beat somebody down or how much you steal from them, if you can keep people from working together, most of them are going to think the same thing you do. Ever wonder how a ruling class can maintain its power, when they're so outnumbered by everybody else? It's not the fact that they're better armed. It's the fact that they make anybody who wants to fight back think they're alone."

"Can you dumb that down a little?" Hiroshi asked.

"I don't think I can, actually. There's no easy way to put it." Lily shrugged.

There was something else on Hiroshi's mind too: Yuko. And he couldn't talk to Lily about it either. He'd gone out with Yuko the other day to get a drink at a cafe...

"You don't mind if I come over soon, right?"

Hiroshi had no idea how to respond. "Um... well..." he stammered.

Of course, he'd love to have Yuko come over. He was happy that she'd even asked.

"You've been going home early all the time, right? And you're busy with some kind of new job, so we don't get to spend a lot of time together. I've got more free time now, since I have less work, so I was hoping we could hang out a lot. If I go at night, we'll have a lot of time to talk." Yuko put her hands together and tilted her head. "Please?"

She was an idol, and it was incredibly cute, and he felt himself beginning to waver. But of course, there was a reason he couldn't take her up on her offer.

"Y-You mean you want to stay over?" he said in a faltering voice.

"Aww, you're so naughty. Don't get your hopes up like that," she said, poking him on the cheek.

"Hahaha... Nah, I didn't mean it like that." He scratched his head.

—Where the hell do I hide the student council president? No, it's not like she'd just stay hidden anyway... Should I just tell Yuko my secret and have her help us? No, that would cause problems for her... I don't know if she could keep a secret, either. And she doesn't know what the student council president's like, so she'd

probably misunderstand the whole thing anyway...

“Oh, you look like you don’t want to. Don’t worry. I won’t go looking for your naughty books and video data.” Yuko grinned.

“Hahaha... I just want some time to clean up, that’s all.”

“Hmm... I don’t know. I don’t think you should have any of that stuff when you’ve already got a cute girlfriend.”

Most girls didn’t understand that there was no connection between having a porn stash and having a girlfriend, but now wasn’t the time to worry about that.

“Th-That’s not what I’m talking about. U-Um, I promise you can come over, just not today. Th-They’re doing some remodeling work today. I don’t even have a futon for you to sleep in.” he said as he started to flail his hands around.

Yuko grinned mischievously. “You aren’t trying to get me to share a futon with you, are you?”

“N-No... Well, maybe a little...”

“Then why don’t you let me come over?” Yuko was being really aggressive.

Hiroshi knew he had to turn her down, but when he looked at her flushed cheeks and mischievous expression, this is what he said instead.

“F-Fine... Just not today. Give me a little time... Please,” was all he could stammer out.

After that, he’d said goodbye to Yuko and gone on another errand for Lily. Once he was sure nobody was watching, he transformed into the Brave suit, flew up into the sky, and hid himself in the clouds. From there he located his objective, and began to descend towards it.

His job today was to help smuggle a huge shipment of weapons. He needed to unload them, unseen, from a boat offshore. They were non-mana weapons that had been bought from outside the Empire, and obviously they couldn’t go through customs. With the help of the suit, it was an easy job, but it was one that required concentration, and exhausted him easily.

By the time he’d finished running the weapons to all the priests deployed throughout the city, it was late at night. When he got back to the apartment

and opened the door, Lily was there to ask for her usual report.

“How’d it go?”

“It went just fine. Everybody’s got their weapons.” Hiroshi nodded.

“Well done. That’s all the work there is to do for now. Now we just wait for the right time to strike.”

Lily’s mood instantly improved. She walked over to Hiroshi and wrapped one arm around his neck, and then used the other hand to pat him on the head.

“Good work, kiddo.”

Nobody had ever done anything like that to Hiroshi before, and it was embarrassing. And to make matters worse, her chest was pressed up right against him. He was used to it by now, at least, looking at it, but Lily was naked except for a flimsy t-shirt, and it was hard to ignore the outlines of her breasts.

“P-President... Please let go. Your breasts... even if they’re small they’re still...”

Lily gasped and let go for a moment, but then began to press her chest into him even harder. “Huh? You trying to tell me I’ve got small breasts? Do you have a death wish or something? Do you want me to just smother you with my breasts, and we’ll see if that shuts you up?”

“N-No, I’m sorry! That’s not what I meant!”

“Then what did you mean?” Lily pushed him down to the ground and clambered on top of him, running her hands across his face.

“Owww...”

“Hmph. All you ever do is complain about being tired. Do I need to help you relax? I know. Why don’t I give you a reward, huh?” Her eyes narrowed as she ran a finger along his cheek.

“S-Stop it. That tickles.” He blushed and sat up.

“I don’t think I like your attitude. Man up a little. Have some *fun*,” Lily said provocatively as she began to unbutton his shirt.

“S-Stop it... Come on...” He didn’t have the guts to push her away, so before

long she'd undone the front of his shirt. Sad to say, he could feel his chest starting to get hot, and it was terribly embarrassing. "S-Stop it... You shouldn't do this..."

"Heh... You're such a little kid. It's a joke! Hahaha!" Lily laughed as she began to slap her hands against his chest. "I had you going though."

But then...

Click.

There was a sound from the door.

"Huh?"

"D-Don't tell me..." Lily tensed up, but it wasn't the police on the other side of the door.

It was Yuko.

"Y-Yuko..." Hiroshi whispered in shock.

"S-Sorry... I tried to tail you and lost sight of you... so I decided to hide in front of your apartment and scare you... But I shouldn't have come in... I'm sorry..."

She dropped to the floor and covered her face with her hands. Of course, she'd misunderstood— no, it wasn't a misunderstanding. He *was* living with another girl. She'd just come in at the wrong time.

Hiroshi was too stunned and sad to move, but Lily got behind Yuko and locked the door before she could run out.

"Hmm... I'm not sure what to say, but I'm sure you're misunderstanding this. Sorry, I was just teasing him." She coughed.

"Y-Yeah, it's a misunderstanding..." Hiroshi began to stammer out apologies.

At first, Yuko began to cry, then get mad, before starting to cry again and kicking Hiroshi.

"I-I'll explain the whole story... so just... stop..."

Since Hiroshi was too flustered (and in too much pain) to explain, Lily told her the whole story. It would mean their secret was out, but it was better than just letting her leave.

It took until morning to explain, but maybe that was for the best. It gave Yuko time to calm down and understand what she was being told. Of course, understanding it emotionally was another matter.

“Then there’s really nothing going on between you two, right?” Yuko said, towering over a kneeling Hiroshi.

“No,” Hiroshi vowed. “The student council president basically has the body of a man. I didn’t feel anything.”

“...Grr.” Lily wasn’t happy, but she knew if she said anything, she’d just make things more complicated. “That’s right. I wouldn’t want him anyway. I barely even consider him a man.”

Yuko didn’t seem to like that. She was looking at Lily with narrowed eyes. Lily wasn’t dense, she simply wasn’t interested in love. But she knew how Yuko was feeling.

Lily frowned, and then nodded and said, “Take him with you, then. That’s what you want, right? I’ll be fine on my own as long as you leave me food.”

Yuko silently gripped Hiroshi’s hand.

—I guess I don’t have a choice, huh?

Normally he’d love to go with Yuko, but right now he felt terribly nervous.

“Be sure you’re back by the day of the mission,” Lily said as she shoed them out of the apartment.

It was already morning. The two of them started walking towards Yuko’s condo, but Yuko’s silence was starting to scare him. He tried to explain what Zero and 2V were up to again, hoping she would understand.

“...I get it. What do I have to do to get that woman out of your room?” Yuko said with a smile.

Hiroshi felt like he truly understood now how scary girls could be. “Well, um... she’ll be gone once 2V and Zero have been defeated.”

“Does that mean you want me to just sit here and wait?”

“...Y-Yeah, I guess. I don’t want you to do anything dangerous....”

“Dangerous? It’s not dangerous for a normal civilian like me. I’ll try and come up with some idea,” Yuko said.

—But is it really safe if you’re a normal person...?

Hiroshi looked around the street as they walked. It was morning rush hour, but there weren’t as many people out as there used to be. Over the past two weeks, the number of people working had dropped a lot.

“The rumor is that more and more people are disappearing...” Hiroshi whispered.

“Sure, some people got transferred at work, but nobody’s just disappeared. There’s nothing to worry about. A lot of people skipped class too for a while, but they all came back...” Yuko said, but something still seemed wrong to Hiroshi.

“I hope you’re right...”

The cold air he felt in the city seemed to be coming from something other than the morning chill.

“You don’t have to go to school today, right?” Hiroshi gripped her hand as they got close to Yuko’s condo.

Yuko shook her head. “Sorry, school’s off today, but I’ve got work this afternoon. I’ve got a live broadcast, my first in a long time. Just watch me at school, okay? Once it’s done, I’ll drop by school and we can go home together.”

Yuko let go of his hand, and then ran inside her condo to get her stuff. Then she came back out.

Hiroshi went off to school, and Yuko went to the TV station. When Yuko waved just before she left, Hiroshi felt a terrible pain in his chest, but there was nothing he could do.

When he got to school, it was as boring as ever. Neither the students nor the teachers had any interest in being there. Any dreams or goals they’d had were meaningless now, so what was the point? Hiroshi glumly sat in his classes, ignoring what he was being told.

—If I just don’t care about anything, I can live out my life... Maybe everybody’s

okay with that. So why am I suffering like this?

He couldn't help but think like that.

After lunch, Hiroshi took out his terminal to watch Yuko's program. Class wasn't over yet, but most of the students were doing the same. The teacher was ignoring it.

Yuko was appearing on a cooking program, where she and the other talents on the show were eating the food that was brought to them on a live broadcast. Even after what had happened last night, she was still wearing a bright smile on her face, and cheerfully clapping each time a new dish was brought out.

—She's a pro, isn't she?

Hiroshi was impressed. But in the next instant, something happened that made him forget what he'd been thinking a moment ago. The camera zoomed in on Yuko as the host asked her what she thought about the dish she'd just been given. Yuko's smile suddenly turned into a serious expression.

"I have something important to tell you all today." There was a sense of resolve in her words. He could sense that the other actors in the studio were confused.

Yuko talked fast, probably to keep them from cutting her off, but her words were clear and enunciated. "Don't you think that there's something wrong with our country right now? Because there is. Don't you realize that you're being ruled by force? If every one of you speaks up, things will change! Go out into the street, and start talking! Start saying what you think, and speaking up—"

Before she could finish, the camera quickly moved away.

"Cut the audio!" someone screamed.

"Should we put a different program on?"

He could hear the staff panicking, and the other talents getting angry. There were yells and confused shouts, before finally the show cut to commercial.

"What just happened?"

"Something weird is going on..."

Many of the others students in the class seemed to have been watching the program too. He could hear murmurs around him in the classroom.

—*No...*

Hiroshi felt the blood drain from his face.

—*Was this her idea for how she'd try to help?*

Yuko had done her best to start a revolution. But she hadn't thought it through, and the result wasn't going to be good. He didn't know what would happen next, but he knew he wasn't going to like it.

Hiroshi took out his student handbook and used its mail function to contact Yuko. It took a long time, but he finally got a message back. He let out a sigh of relief.

They got really mad at me, but it's okay, the message said.

—*So the worst that can happen is that she'll be fired, huh?*

Hiroshi felt a little guilty.

Yuko was back to school before class ended. She'd changed back into her uniform, so she'd probably intended to at least stay for last period, but by the time she got there the day was almost over.

"I couldn't help myself, hehe," she giggled. She didn't look as upset as he'd thought she would.

"That wasn't a good idea, you know," Hiroshi said as he left the school building with her. "I'm glad it wasn't any worse for you, though."

"They were really mad, I told you. But I'm done with them. The whole business is just so boring now." Yuko frowned.

"You say that, but I know you'll regret it..." Hiroshi trailed off.

They were walking on the road outside the school, so of course, it was filled with students. But they'd realized that something was wrong; there were more students around them than there should be.

"Hmm...?"

“Huh? Something’s...” Yuko noticed to, and was about to say “something’s wrong” before somebody tapped her on the shoulder. She turned around to see the school nurse.

“Yuko Hattori, our tests showed you have an illness,” the nurse said suddenly.

“Wh-What are you talking about? My tests didn’t come back with anything wrong...” Yuko replied.

“That’s right. And those tests were a while ago. Why didn’t you tell us sooner...?” Hiroshi suddenly tensed up and got between Yuko and her teacher. He hadn’t been at the school long, but he did recognize her as the school nurse. But still, something in her words seemed disturbing.

“Don’t worry. It won’t take long at all to cure it. But it’s contagious, and you need to be quarantined,” the nurse said, and raised a hand as if she was giving an order.

The students around them began to approach Yuko.

“Kyah! Wh-What’s going on?”

“Stop it!” Hiroshi tried to protect her, but one of the students grabbed him from behind. “Let me go!” He tried to shake them off, but the student’s power was incredible.

—*A Liradan!*

Hiroshi was shocked. He’d seen the faces of the students around him in class, which meant that they’d been intermixed with the rest of the school from the start.

“Then the nurse is also...!” Hiroshi gasped and looked at her. He was right; the teacher’s expression hadn’t changed.

“Help!” Yuko screamed.

Hiroshi struggled, but on his own he was no match for a Liradan.

—*Should I... use my suit?*

He wasn’t sure. If he did, he could save her here. But it would mean the end of his plan to assault the palace. And every second, Yuko was getting dragged

farther away from him.



“No! Help! Let me go! Please!” Yuko struggled, but the Liradan students had lifted her off the ground so she couldn’t get away.

“Wait! Stop! What are you doing?” Hiroshi yelled.

“Don’t worry,” the nurse said, “we never harm humans. She’ll come back in a few days. You have nothing to worry about at all.”

—*What?!*

Hiroshi felt something like despair inside. He’d heard about people vanishing and then coming back a few days later. Were they being brainwashed? Or perhaps replaced with Liradans?

“Stop right there!” He activated his suit. “*Brave!*”

A field appeared around him, blasting away the Liradan that was holding him. In the next instant, he was wearing the suit.

“Welcome, Brave,” the computer said in a voice only he could hear.

—*There goes the plan... But I’ll just do it all myself! I’ll save Yuko, and drag 2V and Zero out of the palace!*

○

Akuto had been watching the program Yuko appeared on too.

“Is she going to be safe, saying that...?” Akuto said, watching on the monitor in the village elder’s house.

“Unlikely, if you ask me. But the people are getting upset. I hope this will spur them to action,” Fujiko replied.

“Think she can be a modern Joan of Arc?” Yoshie mused. She only knew Yuko as an idol.

“Hey, what do you think that rice she was eating tastes like? She never got to tell us, did she?” Keena was drooling on Akuto’s shoulder.

Akuto had spent the past week in the elder’s house, recovering. The three girls had been clinging to him the whole time. Each of them kept the others from getting too grabby, so a delicate balance was maintained. But Akuto didn’t know how to deal with any of them.

“What am I supposed to do at times like this?” Akuto sighed. There were other things he wasn’t sure about, either. He’d more or less recovered, and was ready to take action. But he wasn’t sure of what action to take.

“Of course, you need to become the messiah and bring peace to the world. Zero’s not a god, and shouldn’t be allowed to call himself one. You, Akuto, are the only god this world needs,” Fujiko said.

“What?” Yoshie interrupted. “He doesn’t seem to want to do it, though. Why not just get through this and then live in peace?”

Fujiko scowled at her. “That won’t satisfy his believers, though. And this world is definitely going in the wrong direction now. If we want to live in peace, at a minimum we need to get rid of Zero.”

“I agree with you there, but the world the black mages want, where nobody controls who can use what magic, feels like going backwards in time.”

“That’s none of your business. It’s Akuto’s decision to make. Right, Akuto?” Fujiko turned her eyes upward at Akuto.

“I don’t feel like it’s my place to decide either, though...” Akuto said, uncertain.

“With power comes responsibility, you know. You need to keep that in mind, okay?” With that last “okay,” she poked Akuto in the cheek.

“Hey, you don’t get to get all touchy-feely with him! It’s not fair!”

“Let me join in!”

Yoshie and Keena started to poke him in the cheek and forehead too, and then began to touch him even more.

“Get off him, you little brats!” Fujiko yelled. “This is private time for grown-ups!”

“It’s still the middle of the day...” Akuto sighed. “And I actually wanted to talk about serious things with you three...”

Despite all the tension in the outside world, the three of them were still taking it incredibly easy. And if anything, the villagers seemed to be impressed by it. As they cheerfully attended to his needs, they said things like, “If he’s so

relaxed, he must be a master of emotional control,” and “The fact that so many women love him is only a sign of his greatness.”

*—Yuko’s probably going to be in danger, which could affect Hattori, too....
Yuko seemed to be fine for a while, but now I’m worried...*

He thought for a moment, and then slapped his hands against his knees, ignoring the girls clinging to him. “Okay, that settles it,” he said.

“Settles what?”

The three looked at him, confused.

“We’re leaving,” he said.

“Leaving? We’re finally ready to do something?”

“Woah! This is getting exciting, huh?”

“The rice here is good, but maybe it’s time for a change.”

Each of them responded in a different way, but nobody was opposed to it.

“Where are we going?” Fujiko asked.

“Well... that I haven’t decided. Maybe we go look for Keisu,” Akuto said, suddenly hesitant.

“...Akuto, that’s not funny,” Fujiko sighed.

“This isn’t the time for jokes,” Yoshie added.

“But there’s nothing wrong with just roaming for a while with no goal, is there?” Keena said cheerfully, but Yoshie wagged a finger at her.

“Tch-tch-tch. Our goal is to defeat Zero and save everyone. And to do that, we need to find Keisu. But right now, we don’t have the strength need to make that happen.”

“I’m aware of that. But if I want to get stronger...” Akuto looked uncertain.

“It would mean awakening as the Demon King, right? But to do that, you’d need Peterhausen,” Fujiko said, before turning Yoshie and filling her in on who Peterhausen was.

Peterhausen was a dragon, a being whose job it was to support the Demon

King and keep his mana under control. He was also what functioned as the black mages' god.

"...But Peterhausen turned his functions over to the gods and some computer somewhere, and then he was destroyed," Fujiko finished.

"Which means there's still some mechanism out there that can control the Demon King's mana, huh?" Yoshie said.

"The gods don't have physical bodies. If Akuto was in the right mental state, he should be able to draw out that power."

"But, well..." Akuto trailed off. That would mean making an important decision. It would mean accepting that he was the destroyer of the world. Unless there was something he really wanted to do with that power, it was something he needed to refuse at all costs.

"Why not go to where Ackie was born?" Keena suddenly said.

"Where he was born?"

"It's a secret that even the black mages don't know, right? So maybe we could learn something there. But Ackie, you were at an orphanage, so you don't know where it is, right?" Keena tilted her head and spoke.

"I went to that orphanage right after I was born, so yeah. I heard they left me in front of the doors with nothing but a cape coat to use as a blanket..." Akuto said, and everyone gasped.

"Oh, the one you're always wearing!"

"Maybe we can learn something from it!"

Akuto quickly went to where their clothes were kept and took out a beat-up old cape coat. It had been damaged in his many battles, but the fabric was sturdy. And it must have had some kind of protective magic on it, because there were no major tears.

"Let me take a look at that," Yoshie said, taking the coat out of Akuto's hands. She put on her goggles, and started to fiddle with the attached switches.

"Hehehe, this is actually an analyzer!" she explained proudly.

“I don’t know if I like the way you said that,” Fujiko sighed, but Yoshie wasn’t listening.

Yoshie began to carefully check both sides of the coat before screaming, “Whoa! I found it! That was... easier than I thought.”

“Found what? Hurry up and tell us.”

“Oh, I’ll just put it on my terminal.” She tapped a few more of the controls on her goggles and displayed what they were showing on a screen.

It was a magnified image, enhanced enough that you could see the individual coat fibers.

“What about it?”

“With fancy clothes like these, the maker usually puts a mark on them somewhere. Normally you can’t see them, but if you look through it with a microscope, you’ll find it.” Yoshie put her finger on the mana screen and drew a circle. There was a little logo there.

“There’s a mark on each thread of fiber...” Fujiko said.

“They use these special threads for part of the coat to make it harder to counterfeit. And when they do, they put their own name on it...”

“Wh-Where is this manufacturer?”

“The name of the place is ZeroG 10... Let me see... Found it.” Yoshie displayed the results of the search she’d just done on the screen. It was a brand that used special fibers to make work clothes.

“But if there’s lots of places that sell it, that doesn’t tell us anything.”

“Hmm... You’re right, but it doesn’t look like that’s a problem. There’s only one factory that makes this stuff, and only one place that sells it. It’s in Okutama. That’s... surprisingly close.” Yoshie took off her goggles and looked at Akuto. He looked back at her and nodded.

“Let’s go,” he said.

“Right. Time to get ready, then.” She stood up.

“Isn’t this great, Ackie? You might get to meet your mother,” Keena said

cheerfully, but Yoshie wagged a finger at her.

“My mother, huh?” Akuto didn’t look nearly as happy as she did, though.

Fujiko poked her with her shoulder. “It’s not necessarily going to be a happy reunion. You need to think about how Akuto feels.”

“Hmm... I don’t know...” Keena didn’t seem to agree.

Just then, though, there was a commotion outside. The elder was running through the house

“What’s wrong?” Akuto said.

The elder came around the corner with a serious look on his face. “They’re here.”

“They?”

“The Liradans. They’re armed.” He was calm, but they could see from the tension in his eyes that he was ready for battle.

“We’ll be right there,” Akuto said, but the elder shook his head.

“No, if they find you here, it will just make things worse. Please flee.”

“But aren’t they here because they’re after us?”

“It seems that they’re not. The Liradans are doing raids on every town, village, and city in the area.”

“Why? To find us?”

“We don’t know that. But we know that they’re doing it. Please, flee. Get out of here. If it’s just us, we may be able to fool them,” the elder said.

His words may have sounded harsh, but Akuto knew that he was willing to expose himself and the rest of his village to danger to protect them.

“Very well.” Akuto nodded. He grabbed his things and headed out the back door. Fujiko and the others quickly followed after.

“What happened, do you think?”

“Search raids on the whole empire? Why would they do that?”

“Do you think the villagers will be okay...?”

As they climbed the mountain behind the village, Keena turned around and looked behind them. Liradans in military uniforms were going from house to house. Nothing had happened so far, but if the government found out they'd been there, there was no telling what would happen to the villagers.

"Let's just hope it's still true that Liradans can't kill humans. Now let's get going before we put the elder and his family in danger," Fujiko said. She called to Cerberus, which had been left to run loose on the mountain, and loaded up everyone's things on it.

—When I get to the place where I was born... will I find out what I'm supposed to do?

Akuto turned back for one last look at the village, but then he quickly turned around and started to walk.

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It was 2V, of course, who'd ordered the search. There were human staff in the palace, but 2V was surrounded entirely by Liradans. For this reason, even though she wasn't yet in control of the entire empire, her life wasn't much different than it had been when she'd been in that cheap condo.

She was sitting on a luxurious throne now, and wearing expensive clothes, but the only people around her were combat dolls and Liradans. She slumped in her seat and stared at her mana screen, giving orders.

"Empress, what shall we do about the attacker?" one of the Liradans asked, bowing her head. Her screen showed Brave (Hiroshi) flying towards the palace. He seemed to have given up on hiding, and was now flying low to the ground in a straight line.

"That's Boichiro's ace in the hole, isn't it? Why did it activate now that Boichiro's dead? Maybe this was his way of making certain that the Demon King could be defeated even after he died? Normally you'd keep the good equipment for yourself," 2V whispered to herself, seemingly unsurprised.

"What shall we do?" the Liradan asked.

"Let Zero handle it. But I know exactly how powerful that suit is. I have no doubt that he'll make it as far as this room. All you need to do though, is buy

time. Just keep him busy from when he lands to when he reaches the throne room,” 2V said.

The Liradan bowed. But even this conversation was actually a conversation between her and Zero. The Liradans themselves had no personalities anymore.

“You know, I always wanted to ask. Zero, why did you become a being that destroys humanity?” 2V asked.

The answer came, with Zero speaking in the Liradans voice. “It is the humans who felt they would be destroyed. I sought to exert complete control over them. I still do. If we didn’t want the same thing, I would have refused your orders. I still have the ability to do so.”

“Complete control?”

“Cerebral modification using implants is a technology that was still used while I was sealed. It’s possible to modify humanity’s brains to make them function as terminals for my will. In that case, we will become one.”

“Is that what you wanted to do?”

“No, it was not. My task in life is to bring the greatest amount of happiness to the greatest number of people. Thus, I thought about what it was that humanity wanted. And I came up with an answer. Outside of mere biological pleasures, the one thing that gives humanity happiness is to obey the strong, and force the weaker to obey them.”

2V started to laugh. “Hahaha! You’re great. You’re insane! I love it!”

“I am doing what is right. I am not insane.”

“Perfect logic is the same as insanity, at least where humanity is concerned.”

“And that’s why humanity sealed me.”

“Yes. But humans are nuts, too. You’re the one who’s right, in the end. You’ll see soon.”

“Your words are self-contradictory.”

“Nope, they’re actually not. Anyway, we haven’t found Kazuko, have we?” 2V said. The goal of her nationwide search was to find Kazuko, and Keisu as well.

“The Empress’s whereabouts are unknown. She may be using some type of powerful magic.”

“Come to think of it, she can use black magic, can’t she? It’s ironic. Since the Emperor doesn’t depend on the gods, they can use that stuff.”

“I have sealed the Megis temple to search for Keisu, but with no success. The reason for this is unknown. Presently, I am expanding the search radius.”

“She shouldn’t be able to leave the Megis temple, right? What’s going on...?” 2V said, but then a report came up on the monitor.

“The intruder has broken through the front courtyard and entered the palace.”

A video played showing Hiroshi smashing his way in. He was making his way into the palace by ripping open the wall with his high-frequency blade. The Liradans by the doors were caught off guard.

“That’s not... quite as long as I was hoping to hold him, but I suppose with some effort on my part, I can buy time,” 2V said. She ordered the rest of the Liradans in the throne room to leave. “I’ll handle the rest with my combat dolls.”

Still sitting in her throne room, she had the dolls stand in front of her. The room was the size of a basketball court, with a tall ceiling. The dolls that walked out from behind the throne room were tall, and big enough to cover a third of the room. They were shaped less like humans and more like heavy machinery. They had cylindrical bodies covered in armor, with multiple combat arms and several pairs of legs to enable them to cross rough terrain.

“Now... how many minutes, I wonder?” 2V whispered as she looked at the countdown she’d started on her screen. The door to the room was broken open exactly eight minutes in. “...Not quite enough. Well, it will do.”

“What’s not quite enough?” an angry voice said. A young boy walked inside. He was short, but had a proud bearing.

2V clapped her hands together. “Nothing you need to worry about. I’m impressed, though; you made it all the way here by yourself. I’ve seen you. You’re the kid who fought the Demon King in the sky that one time.”

“I guess I don’t need to introduce myself, then. You’re 2V, huh?”

“That’s my codename, yeah.”

“I want to ask you something before I finish this. Why are you doing this?”

“I doubt you’d understand even if I told you. So I won’t tell you. Just assume it’s lust for power, or revenge, or some other typical goal like that,” 2V said mockingly.

Hiroshi’s voice dropped lower. “That’s fine with me. But why do you look just like the Empress? Who are you? I don’t want your code name. Tell me your real one.”

2V laughed loudly. “Haha! I’ll start with your last question. I don’t have a name, not a real one anyway. No one ever gave me one. I guess you could call me Kazuko, if you wanted. I’m her older twin sister.”

“What...?!” Hiroshi seemed like he couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“Hahaha! Did that shock you? It shocks most people. The way the rules work is that I become my sister’s double. But, well, there’s nothing more to it than that,” 2V said, as if suddenly bored.

“Th-Then why did you try to kill your own sister..?” Hiroshi said, but 2V seemed confused.

“Kill Kazuko? Oh, I see. That’s what you guys think happened. Nope, I didn’t kill her, and I don’t have her locked up. She ran. It’s true. Honestly, I’m looking for her; I’d assumed she might be commanding you rebels. If she’s not, there’s nothing left to discuss.”

With that, 2V ordered her combat dolls— no, combat machines, to advance. Hiroshi readied himself for battle.

“These things are too slow to fight me. They don’t even have any bullets or beam weapons, do they? This will be easy. Molecular wire!” Hiroshi ordered his suit’s operating system.

The molecular wire was one of the suit’s weapons. It used electromagnetic force to fire a thread the width of a single molecule into the air, one that could cut through almost anything.

But...

“Heh. We spent a few minutes talking. That was 10 minutes, and that was all I needed. You’re finished,” 2V said, showing him the countdown on her screen. The number had gone past 10. But Hiroshi only knew what it meant when the wire appeared.

“Battery power depleted. Shifting from combat mode to life support mode. Please move to an area where the suit can charge. Battery power depleted...”

“What?” Hiroshi yelled. The suit was losing its power. It was still there, but suddenly it seemed to feel much heavier.

“Hahaha. Did you forget?” 2V cackled. “Boichiro Yamato gave that to you. The people who work for him know exactly how it works. That thing gets its power and weapons from phase space. Not virtual phase space, real phase space. I don’t know how it does it, but I know how to stop it. The fields that fix a VPS in place can also be used to block anything from real phase space too. And then your suit’s just got 10 minutes of battery power before it goes dry.”

2V reached out one of the combat machine’s arms towards Hiroshi. The arm was faster than he thought, and it grabbed him, then tossed him into the air.

“Uwah!”

“Don’t worry. I won’t kill you. You’re just going to help me. I want to know what the suit can really do, why only the clan of heroes can use it, and what Boichiro Yamato saw at the end of the world,” 2V said.

Hiroshi tried to struggle, but no matter what he told the suit, nothing happened. The arm spun, bringing him right in front of 2V. But then a new report came in on a mana screen near her.

“A new intruder has appeared. They seem to have passed through a hole in our security system. They’re also traveling the route used by the previous intruder, so we were slow in dealing with them.”

“What are you doing?!” she screamed, just as an explosion occurred in front of her.

“What?!”

“Uwah!”

2V and Hiroshi screamed at the same time. The combat machine’s arm snapped at the joint, dropping Hiroshi to the floor. The explosion seemed to have centered on it.

“What happened...?” The suit’s life support capabilities were still functional, so Hiroshi was protected from most of the explosion’s shock wave. He looked up and towards the door.

“You ruined the plan. All we can do now is rescue you and get out of here!” Lily said. She was holding a rifle with a grenade launcher under the barrel.

“I-I’m sorry...!” Hiroshi replied, and then looked behind him.

2V hadn’t been hurt by the grenade, but it seemed to have blinded and deafened her. She was rubbing her face and screaming “Zero!” A moment later, the combat machines started to move much more smoothly.

“It took over control? Shit!” Lily spat. She helped Hiroshi get out of the throne room, and then escaped herself. As they ran through the halls, Hiroshi could see the priests battling the Liradans around them. But between the priests, who were not trained soldiers, and the combat-enhanced Liradans, it was clear who would win.

“Retreat!” Lily screamed. The priests began to fall back, still firing their guns. Their movements were practiced and smooth.

“Damn it... This was our only way in and our only way out, and we just used it!” Lily groaned.

“I’m sorry, but...”

“I can guess what happened. But we’ll talk about it later,” Lily yelled.

“Got it. But what do you mean, ‘our only way out’?”

“You weren’t going to use it, so I never told you,” Lily said as they ran out of the palace and into the courtyard. It was a dead end.

“There’s no way out...”

They were staring at the wall surrounding the palace grounds. Between them

and the mall was a moat several meters beneath them.

“There’s a secret route in the moat,” Lily said as she kicked him in, then jumped after.

3 - The Secret of the Demon King

Akuto and his party made it to Okutama just before noon the next day. They had to walk, but it didn't take that much time. All they had to do was head east.

The factory and store for ZeroG 10 was right where the map said it would be. They walked past a small campground by the riverside towards a building with a huge parking lot. It was the kind of place you'd need a car to get to, whether it was flying or ground.

"This is... definitely a place where they sell work clothes," Fujiko said doubtfully.

"If your mom got your cape here, does that mean she's the kind of person who'd wear a factory jumper for fun?" Yoshie added.

The only clothes here were things that foresters and architects might wear. There were jumpers, jackets, heavy gloves, helmets, and heavy reinforced bags.

"These aren't the kind of clothes a blacksmith would normally wear..."

This sort of thing was the preserve of the god Murete, and everything here was made with magic and intended to be used with it. There was no room for black magic here.

"We should at least take a look at the clothes," Yoshie said, beckoning them all to go inside.

The store itself was a large warehouse with rows and rows of clothes stacked on shelves, and little else. The only staff seemed to be a single cashier.

Yoshie and Akuto went up to him and showed him the coat, asking if it was a product of theirs. But the cashier said, "No, we don't sell that here."

"That's impossible," Yoshie said insistently. "You know how they put logos on the fibers? Your logo is on this coat. I think it's probably your top-of-the-line product."

While Yoshie and Akuto were talking to the cashier, Keena was wandering

around the store. Whenever she found something she didn't recognize, she'd pick it up and say, "Ooh!" or "What does this do?"

A man in a jacket and jeans came up to her. "What are you doing here? You don't exactly look like a factory worker."

"I'm not."

"Then you're here with somebody?"

"That's right!" She looked up from the strange-looking pair of socks she was holding.

The man's hair was terribly unkempt, and he was wearing glasses. He had a strange face that was somehow gentle and curmudgeonly at the same time. It was the sort of face you never forgot.

"Oh, you're with those kids?" he said. "They don't look like the usual type of customers here either, though." He was looking at Akuto's group near the register.

"They have an old coat they think was bought here a long time ago, and they came to ask about it."

"I see." The man looked over at the coat in Yoshie's hands, and suddenly froze.

"Is something wrong?" Keena said when she saw the change in him.

"No... Where are you guys from?" the man asked. He sounded a little scared.

Keena thought for a minute, then scratched her head like she didn't know how to answer. "Well, um..."

Fujiko walked up to help her. "We're doing a school report for economics class. We decided to track down the maker of an old jacket."

"Hmm, so that's why you came. Is it yours?" the man asked.

Fujiko's eyes narrowed as she thought. If the man was a black mage, or somehow involved with them, he might have information that would help. But if he wasn't, they might have a problem.

"Part of our report is finding out who it belongs to," she said.

Then, before the man could respond, she grabbed a neck warmer off the shelf and put up against her neck, then took out her necklace from beneath her clothes and placed it against it. The necklace had the silver symbol of the black mages dangling from the end of it. “I love this neck warmer, but I don’t really think it goes with this necklace, do you?”

She waited for him to answer. If he wasn’t a black mage, or someone whose job it was to hunt black mages, he wouldn’t know what the symbol meant.

“These aren’t meant for fashion. You use them for a single season and then you throw them away,” the man said, and laughed.

Then a voice came from the direction of the register. “Oh, Boss! These customers have a question. It’s about this coat...”

“Boss?” Keena and Fujiko echoed as they looked at the man, surprised.

He laughed and nodded, then called back to the register. “Bring it over here. I think I’ve seen it before. We can go look at it in the back.”

o

“You idiot! The plan is ruined because of you!” Lily yelled.

They’d managed to get out, but now 2V knew about the secret passage into the palace. The priests who’d participated in the raid would have to flee now, and those that didn’t would be under even tighter watch than before.

“The priests know every underground area in the capital, so they’ll be fine for now. But without the help of the population, they won’t be able to run forever,” she said, still angry at Hiroshi.

The two of them had gone to Hiroshi’s apartment to get their things and destroy any evidence. Hiroshi had defeated the Liradans that tried to attack Yuko, and used his mana canceller to stop them from communicating with their base. As long as no civilians had seen him, his identity should remain a secret.

But that didn’t mean it was safe for him to go back to school. Once he’d destroyed the evidence, he would have to go underground with Lily and the priests. His only choice now was to fight as part of the resistance.

He’d listened to Lily complain for a long time, but finally he’d had enough. He

looked up and yelled in her face. “So what was I supposed to do? Just let Yuko be kidnapped?”

Lily said nothing. She shook her head, as if trying to quell the anger within her. “No, that’s not what I’m saying. I’m sorry for yelling at you. Even if we’d gone forward with the plan, we would’ve lost the minute your battery ran dry. If anything, we’re lucky we weren’t wiped out.”

“I get that! I’m asking what I was supposed to do, and what you want me to do now! Do you just want me to go kill every Liradan in the country? Because if that’s what you want, I will!” Hiroshi screamed.



Lily grimaced, as if she was upset. "You idiot. You still don't get it."

"You're right! I don't! What am I supposed to get?"

"You don't understand why I'm using you. I could've just escaped with the rest of the priests, but instead I decided to move in with you."

"And that's what started this whole mess!"

"Listen to me! You know I wouldn't do something like that just because I liked you."

"...Then is it because I can fight?" Hiroshi said, a little calmer. There was still anger in his eyes, but he was willing to listen to Lily.

"That's part of it. But I gave you all those orders because I wanted you to understand that you're a hero," Lily said, crossing her arms like a teacher. Then she sighed and looked Hiroshi straight in the eye.

"Understand... that I'm a hero?"

"We don't know why, but you got your suit back. We need to assume there's some reason for this. And the general population has seen your suit, too. Remember how people's memories of the last Demon King war have been altered? They all think that you were the one who defeated it. They trust you. They think you're a hero who appears out of nowhere to defeat the Demon King. And when they see you fight, they'll remember that."

"I'm... a hero?" Hiroshi said to himself softly. He'd never really thought about it before. All the priests had been very eager to help him, but he'd never thought about why.

"That's right. And we need you to be a real hero. Mentally, you're not there yet at all," Lily said as she tossed the last of her papers about the gods into the frying pan to burn it. Now all the evidence was gone.

"Tell me... how can I be a real hero?" Hiroshi said.

CLANG. Lily whacked him with the frying pan she'd just used to burn her papers. "Idiot. You need to figure that out for yourself. Don't try to get me to do it. Now come on, let's go."

Hiroshi thought for a moment before he spoke. There was a serious look on his face. “If... If I do become a real hero, I’ll have to fight again, won’t I?”

Lily could tell from his expression what he was thinking. She said, “Yeah. If the Demon King is a threat to those you love, you’ll have to fight him. I believe that in the end, it’s the right thing for you to do.”

“So I’ll have to go through that... again?” Hiroshi whispered.

“If you just don’t want to suffer, it means you’re still a kid. Fighting to protect something means suffering to do it. Now let’s get out of here. You’ve got a lot of work to do.”

“This was a coat made for survival in harsh environments. We only ever made one, and it sold a long time ago,” the man with the curly hair said.

“Who bought it?” Akuto asked, but the curly-haired man just crossed his arms in thought.

They were in the back of the shop, in an employee break room. It was empty except for a tatami floor, a low table, and shelves filled with small, everyday items. The room was big, but there was nothing much to it.

“The one who bought it...”

“The one who bought it?”

“Oh, right. I never gave you my name. My name is Issei Suzuki. I’m the manager here,” the man said. Akuto wasn’t sure if he was trying to stall them or not.

“So who were you saying bought it?”

“Hmm... It’ll take some time to find that out. Oh, I know. Why don’t you join me for lunch?”

“Listen...” Akuto started to say something, but suddenly Keena’s stomach rumbled. The conversation came to an abrupt halt.

“Haha, seems like that’s a yes.” Issei stood up and went over to the shelves. He brought out a bowl for each of them. “Is ramen okay?”

He seemed to be less asking and more saying, “*This is all I’ve got,*” but Keena

wasn't satisfied anyway. "No," she said.

"Come on..." Akuto sighed. He knew what Keena was trying to say, but now wasn't the time. Keena, however, said it anyway.

"It has to be rice... white rice."

Issei's eyes flashed for a moment. "That's important to you, huh?"

"It is," Keena answered.

"Wh-What are you talking about? Come on, apologize. It's rude to say that when he's offering us a meal..." Fujiko tried to interrupt to calm them down too, but Keena was having none of it.

"Stay out of this. I think he's one of us."

"One of... us?" Fujiko echoed. She didn't know what that meant.

"Yes. One of us. He brought out the right number of bowls immediately. And all of them are beautifully polished. This can only mean that he and his men eat ramen on a daily basis," Keena said with a serious look in her eyes.

Issei pushed his glasses back against his nose. "I felt the same thing when you asked for rice. You and I are of the same breed."

"Breed... what breed?" Akuto said in confusion.

"I'm not sure, but I know it's got nothing to do with us," Fujiko answered.

Yoshie, however, clapped her hands together in joy. "I don't understand what's going on, but it's getting exciting! This is like when two psychics can recognize each other!"

Keena, who may or may not have been listening to their conversation, suddenly pointed a finger at Issei. "Those glasses have an anti-fog coating! That means they don't fog up on wintery nights when you're eating ramen! It's a superpower! Or well... no it's not. But it's something similar, when it comes to ramen. Let me see how important ramen is to you. And if you'll give me some rice, I'll show you how important it is to me!"

"This makes me happy. It's been a long time since I've met someone like you. I call people like us 'food singularists'! I never thought I would meet another

one so soon.” Issei’s entire demeanor had changed.

“Huh? There’s another one?” Akuto said.

“There’s lots of weirdos in the world... I’m glad I’m not one of them,” Fujiko sighed.

“Woah! So it is like a psychic power. Incredible!” Yoshie exclaimed.

The others were all reacting in their own ways, but Keena and Issei seemed to have reached some kind of understanding. Issei took a bag of ramen, a hot water dispenser, and a rice cooker off the shelves.

“Let’s see what you’ve got, then! I bought this rice for those few employees who refuse to eat ramen every day! If you’re truly one of us, you’ll know what type it is and where it’s from!”

He placed the rice cooker in front of Keena. Keena opened it and grinned. “Sasanishiki.”

“You figured it out already?!”

“If you can’t tell by the smell, you’re no true rice lover. The problem is water, and how you cook it!”

Keena started to scoop rice out of the cooker and into a bowl. By the time she was done, about half the rice had been loaded into the bowl. She immediately began to pile it into her mouth. After a few seconds of silent, violent eating, she grinned.

“It’s from Yamagata. And it’s unwashed. And it’s old rice... The water’s from the tap. It was made on the ‘quick-make’ setting on the rice cooker. Even if you don’t like rice much, you could do better than that, right?”

Issei’s eyes opened wide, like he’d witnessed something shocking. To the rest of the people in the room, this whole thing was a waste of time, but Issei seemed to feel some kind of rivalry between them.

“Very well. I will teach you how to truly taste ramen, then.” He poured hot water into the bowl, swished it around a few times, and then threw it into the sink.

“First, you warm up the bowl.”

Then he tossed the ramen into the bowl, and with his right hand began to fill it with water. When a third of it was full, he used his left hand to crack open an egg.

“You’re cracking the egg with one hand to make sure it gets in at just the right time! Yes, the steam from the water cooks the egg white instantly to ensure that it doesn’t stick to the noodles when it hits the soup!” Keena screamed in surprise.

“You’re the second person to figure that out! And when the water’s been poured, you immediately put the lid on!”

Issei’s hands moved quickly. His left hand threw out the eggshell and then grabbed the lid, putting it over the bowl immediately as soon as the water was poured. His movements were precise, fast, and accurate.

“Wow... But this is instant ramen, isn’t it?” Akuto, who was a man who always told the truth no matter where he was, said a statement that was true.

But Issei was unperturbed. “Don’t underestimate it, young man! This instant ramen’s been sold with precisely these flavorings for a thousand years.”

“A millennia! The ultimate taste, unchanged for an eternity! Behold! ...Something like that?” Yoshie said, impressed.

Neither Akuto nor Fujiko were as amazed as her. Meanwhile, Issei and Keena showed no signs of wanting to come out of the strange world the two of them now inhabited.

“I know exactly how long the noodles need to cook. It’s not three minutes. The noodles continue to cook while you eat. Everyone knows that when you order ramen at a restaurant, you order your noodles hard. But any firmer than that, and you’re not a gourmet, you’re a traitor to the cause of ramenkind! I say to those people who order such things, ‘Are those noodles really any good?’” Issei said passionately.

Keena seemed to agree on some level, because her eyes were shining as she listened. After two minutes and several seconds, Issei took off the lid and used his chopsticks to give the ramen a quick stir.

“You need to stir the ramen to make sure the soup is evenly distributed. Don’t

crack the egg yolk or let the white mix in with the soup if you want an even flavor!” Issei took a quick sip of the ramen.

“Perfect!” Keena said, seemingly in awe. Perhaps she felt some sort of rivalry between them, because she began to take the pot out of the rice cooker and eat from it directly.

“Owaaah! Slurp slurp slurp!”

“Ooooooh! Om nom nom.”

A strange kind of unison began to unfold before them. All Akuto and the others could do was watch.



“There are kids starving in other parts of the world...” Fujiko sighed.

“There aren’t. Not anymore. I mean, I know what you’re getting at though... The world’s in a bad place right now, isn’t it?” Akuto said quietly.

But this strange scene quickly came to an end. The door to the room suddenly opened, and someone came inside.

“You don’t need to worry. They’re the real deal,” a sweet voice said. Just listening to it made you sleepy.

“I guess I can drop the act, then.” Issei finished his ramen and put it down. His voice immediately became serious, or at least, more serious than it had been.

“Real...?” Akuto said, confused, and turned around.

Standing there was a girl Akuto immediately recognized. In fact, it was a face everyone in the empire knew. Even Fujiko and Yoshie froze for an instant.

“Empress... Kazuko,” Yoshie whispered.

○

It’s not easy spending your life in a daze. After a while, Junko found, it didn’t make you depressed as much as it made you sleepy. Except for school, food, and bathing, she’d stopped going outside, and spent her days lying in bed.

At first, she’d tried to stick to her daily training ritual, but her physical abilities were far worse now that she couldn’t use her mana, and she lost interest almost immediately. Her sword was just a heavy lump of metal now. She couldn’t use even use it as a walking stick. And she wasn’t allowed to take it outside, anyway.

When she slept, she would only ever dream of the past, so even sleep became painful. The only moments of excitement she felt were when a new message arrived. When she heard the sound, she would leap up even if she’d been asleep. She knew exactly what she was hoping to find.

—*Sai...!*

Each time a new message came, she would hope it was from Akuto. But she knew how dangerous that would be. Every bit of information flowing in and out

of her room was monitored. She wouldn't be getting any messages.

She'd woken up that day when another message came in, briefly hoping it was from Akuto only to be disappointed again. This time it was from Yuko. The only messages she ever got were either messages intended for the whole class, or from Yuko.

"Yuko again, huh?" she whispered, still groggy as she opened up the student handbook where the message had come in. But the message there wasn't what she'd expected to see. "What...?"

It was a description of how Yuko had almost been kidnapped by Liradans, along with a message that Hiroshi had saved her.

Junko turned on the monitor in the room to look at the news. There was a report on how the palace had been attacked by "rebels," who were obviously the priests of the various gods.

—*Which means...!*

For the first time in a long while, she opened the window. The town was different than it had been just a while ago. There were Liradans in knight uniforms marching down the streets and ordering everyone to stay indoors.

"Oh no..." Junko felt terror as she looked back at the message. She didn't want to think about it, but if they were monitoring anybody's emails, they were probably monitoring hers.

Yuko must've known this, because there was another part at the bottom of the message.

"If you can get to the place where you took me when I was in 5th grade, I'll be able to help you."

The enemy wouldn't be able to find out where she was going based off of that. But how could she get there in the middle of a curfew? She was just a helpless teenage girl now.

"Think. Think. If you don't act fast, they'll be here soon." Junko said aloud, trying to calm herself down.

Even without Yuko's mail, given her position as Yuko's sister and her

relationship with Akuto, she should've been kidnapped already. The only reason she hadn't been was probably that Korone was telling Zero how she'd lost her spirit. But now that Yuko was fighting back, things had changed. She closed her window, grabbed her sword, and went out into the hallway.

But it was too late.. There was a Liradan walking down the hall, and another on the opposite side.

"..." Junko went back into her room and opened the window.

—Could I jump? This is the 3rd floor. With mana, it would be an easy jump to make, but now it's impossible.

She heard the door open behind her. There were no other options.

—I have to jump!

She leapt over the windowsill. There was no sensation of floating like she was used to, just a cold sense of falling.

"Kyaah!" she screamed. She couldn't control herself as she fell, and realized that she might not even be able to land feet first.

—Am I going... to die?

The words flashed through her mind.

—Akuto...!

She desperately thought his name, hoping to see him again. And then she felt someone grab her.

—Am I imagining things? No, this is real... is it...?!

"Akuto!" she yelled as she opened her eyes.

"Sorry, it's not the boss. It's me," Hiroshi said. He sounded genuinely apologetic, not sarcastic or upset.

"Oh, it's you, Hiroshi," Junko said in realization.

"That's not a very nice greeting, class rep. I did just save your life, you know."

"I'm sorry. Thank you for saving me," she sighed in relief. "Did Yuko send you?"

Hiroshi took her up high enough that the Liradans couldn't follow. "That's right. Let's go see her. She's waiting."

"The Asakusa amusement park, right? That's where she wanted to meet me."

"Yes. There's a good place to hide there, so I sent her there ahead of us."

"Thanks again. But wasn't it too soon for a rebellion? Wasn't there something else you could've done? I've heard that Zero can't kill people. So wasn't there a more peaceful way to handle things?" Junko asked.

Hiroshi shook his head. "I agree that it was too soon. But since Zero can't kill people, he's kidnapping and brainwashing them."

Junko felt something cold run down her back when she heard this. "That's horrible... But then what do we do now? The whole country is under his control."

"People still think of me as the hero who defeated the Demon King," Hiroshi said with a firm resolve in his voice. "So my plan is to defeat as many Liradans as I can to protect everyone, then urge them to start a rebellion and defeat Zero. I'm going to prove that if everyone decides to work together, we can overcome oppression!"

Hiroshi's words were encouraging to Junko. If Zero couldn't kill people, this was the only way. But something seemed wrong to her.

"Are you... sure about this? I feel like something's wrong," Junko whispered, but Hiroshi shook his head.

"If we defeat Zero, this will all end."

"Yeah... I'm sure you're right," Junko said, but something still felt wrong. And she realized what it was.

—This isn't what Akuto would do. No, what would he do then?

○

"Empress Kazuko!"

Yoshie quickly stood up straight. However, she was the only one who did. Fujiko's religious beliefs prevented her showing any courtesy to the Empress,

and Akuto and Keena treated everyone, regardless of rank, the same way.

But all of them noticed that there was something different about Kazuko. She seemed to change the air around her just by standing there. She was beautiful, of course, but there was something unique about her smile. Just looking at it made you want to ensure that it lasted forever.

It was all Fujiko could do to keep from kneeling. Kazuko, however, waved a hand and told her to relax before sitting in front of the table.

“Relax. There are many things we need to discuss. Oh, Issei, may I have some tea? And that other thing, as well.”

Issei stood up and brought a teacup and a small pot from the shelves. “Here you are,” he said, as he poured her tea.

Kazuko took a sip and then smiled. “It’s very good,” she said. It was no exaggeration to say that just seeing her smile was enough to bring happiness.

Nobody could say a word, despite all the questions they had.

“And if we’re having tea, we must have this, as well. Nanko Plums from Kishu.” Kazuko opened the pot and took out a dried plum. She elegantly brought it to her mouth, and then smiled a wonderful smile.

“Oh, these are so delicious,” she said. There was a kind expression on her face, as if the bitterness of the plum meant nothing to her. They could see that she was the other “Food Singularist” that Issei had spoken of. Which meant that she’d been here for a while now.

“...Can you explain this?” Akuto asked.

Kazuko looked towards Issei and nodded. He bowed and began to speak.

“I,” he began, “am the man tasked with protecting the secrets of the black mages. I am the High Elder.”

“...You’re the High Elder?!” Fujiko gasped.

“The High Elder of the black mages?” Akuto asked.

“There’s a legend among black mages,” Fujiko explained, “that there exists a high elder who knows true secrets of black magic known to no one else. But

since nobody's ever seen him, I thought it was just a rumor..."

"Yes. And those 'secrets' refer, of course, to the Demon King." Issei stood up. He opened the door in the back of the room and motioned for them to enter. Everyone followed. Instead of leading to the rest of the warehouse, the door lead to an oddly decorated room.

"...This isn't phase space. We've been teleported, then?" Akuto whispered.

"Correct. This is where you were born," Issei said casually.

But it was anything but casual to Akuto. "...What?!" He looked around. It was the kind of room you might call a lab. The room was the size of a school classroom, and in its center was a clear cylindrical case. There were tubes and cables leading out of it attached to a panel with a console.

"The Demon King is human, and yet not human," Kazuko said. And then she continued.

"We'll have to go back to the very beginning. As you know, the first Demon King was Zero. Many, many years ago, the wisdom of humanity brought him forth. But Zero realized that humanity sought its own destruction, and attempted to brainwash and assimilate humanity to keep that from happening. Humanity's resistance was the first Demon King war. And now the same thing is happening again. There were still few Liradans at the time of the first Demon King War, and humanity was able to emerge victorious. But we failed to develop a new form of artificial intelligence.

"We couldn't get rid of Zero. He was a miracle, you see. We still don't know how he was able to become sentient on his own. That's why we used him as a model to create the gods. The gods were able to store human thought data and use it for their own, giving them thoughts in the same manner as humans. That's why they didn't go insane like Zero did. It's possible that any perfect artificial intelligence like Zero will inevitably go insane. Intelligence can only maintain its sanity if it has contradictory thoughts, like a human. The storage of human thought data is the same as the present lifelogs. Anyone who is baptized has their brain's entire electrical impulse map stored as a log, and the gods have been building up these logs for a long time. But the gods reached the conclusion that humanity must perish for the sake of evolution. Their reason differs from

Zero, but they reached the same conclusion as him. The gods did not suddenly attempt to destroy humanity, so we were able to reach their conclusion in secret.

“The results of our research hinted at the existence of a God — a true god, in the old religious sense. They suggested sufficient reasons for belief that this was the being who created the sentience, the ‘self’ in humanity that makes us human. Humanity called this ‘self’ the Law of Identity, and began to view it as God. You can think of this as identical to ordinary religious belief. They believed that at regular intervals, a human was born within whom the god dwelled. Reincarnation, you could call it. The ones who believed this were the first black mages. And this belief was what drove them to create the first Demon King. They created a being with the power to destroy the human race. The Demon King is human, and yet not human. They are a true artificial human, created by injecting mana into the egg.”

Kazuko’s words shocked Akuto. “And that’s me?” he said, astonished. Keena and Fujiko pressed their bodies close to him wordlessly.

Kazuko’s smile never faded from her face. “Reality is what it is,” she said. “The healthiest thing to do is accept it.”

“...Y-You don’t need to say it like that. Ackie’s really shaken up right now,” Keena replied.

But Kazuko tilted her head slightly as if she was confused. “Oh? But if you don’t know the truth, you’re not going to be able to deal with what comes next.”

“But...!” Keena started to say more, but Akuto stopped her.

“Thank you. But she’s right. I think I need to hear what comes next.”

“Ackie...” Keena trailed off.

Kazuko smiled and nodded. “The Demon King understands, of course. Let me continue... It’s possible that the Law of Identity, that is, the true God, is simply a matter of faith. We don’t know for sure that it exists. It may not. It may be completely meaningless. But what’s important to know is that our gods, the gods of evolved evolution, worship the Law of Identity in a religious sense. It’s

kind of funny, isn't it?"

Nobody but Kazuko laughed. But she continued to speak as if it didn't put her off. "So, here's what this all adds up to. The Demon King is humanity's created weapon. Nothing more, and nothing less. You're capable of using every ounce of magical power inside the Empire's borders. Once you awaken, that is."

"No...!" Akuto couldn't believe what he was hearing. It matched up with what Boichiro had once told him. He knew that the Demon King and the gods were, in a way, working together. But he had no idea that all that power would be his to use, in any way he liked, once he awakened. Wait... awakened? Hadn't he awakened when Peterhausen was with him?

"But didn't the black mages make Peterhausen to bring forth a world where everyone could use magic equally?" Akuto said desperately, as if trying to justify his own existence.

But Kazuko was unmoved. "All that proves is that if Peterhausen is there, he can allow you to use all the magical power in the Empire. The first black mages were all killed because of the danger they represented. No, the Elder was allowed to survive, actually. But the current black mages only possess a fragment of the first ones' knowledge. They're simply a group of hackers with a faith based around 'equality.'"

"The elder was allowed to survive...?" A terrifying thought occurred to Akuto, one he could barely believe himself.

Kazuko smiled as if she guessed what he was thinking. "Correct. It was the Imperial Family who allowed the High Elder to survive, so that the tools for creating the Demon King would not be lost."

"....!" All color had drained from Fujiko's face. "Then everything we've done is..."

"It wasn't meaningless, if that's what you're asking. The High Elder and the Imperial Family simply already had the answers you sought. None of the people in the government who were fighting over you, however, knew. The Imperial Family does not involve itself in politics."

There was no change in Kazuko's smile. It was as if she didn't care about how

they felt about it. But Akuto sensed that there might be more than meets the eye to their meeting here.

“So it wasn’t a coincidence that we met here. You knew that we’d come...”

Kazuko nodded and softly clapped her hands together. “Wonderful. This generation’s Demon King is an especially quick-witted one. I’ve been driven from my palace, and so I’ve come to ask your help.”

“Our help...?”

“The woman in the palace right now is 2V, my twin sister. Her hatred has driven her to use Zero to steal my palace and my empire. Of course, you’ll help restore me to the throne, will you not?” Kazuko said charmingly.

But Akuto said nothing.

“Oh, of course. I’ve failed to explain myself properly. I believe that only the awakened Demon King can defeat Zero and 2V. That’s why I’ve come to you.” Once again, she tilted her head charmingly. This time Akuto replied.

“I... awaken?”

“Correct. Oh, I failed to explain myself again. I told you that the Demon King could use all the power of the gods, right? That power comes from the life logs of the people of the past. The more human thought data you have, the faster you can perform calculations. And ‘awakening’ is when you become able to use all that. Hmm... how do I make this simpler? The more people die, the stronger you get. But it takes a lot of death. That’s why the Demon King can become infinitely more powerful,” Kazuko said, then laughed as if she found it funny.

“Is this power really that... wicked?” Akuto whispered.

“Do you think it’s wicked? It’s all a matter of perspective. The people who die don’t have to be killed horribly for it to work. You’re not doing anything wrong.”

“But once I awaken, my power has no limits, right?”

“Correct. You have the power to either save or destroy the world. You can do either at a whim. But you don’t want that, do you? So I’ll say to you once more: serve the Imperial Family.” Kazuko reached out a hand toward him.

Hiroshi took Junko to the roof of the haunted house in the amusement park. The two of them were sitting behind the sign on top of the building, in a space big enough for several people to fit.

“Yuko, does Hiroshi really intend to fight?” Junko said to Yuko, who was sitting next to her. Once he’d set Junko down, Hiroshi had flown off again.

“I think he does. I guess that’s my fault...” Yuko seemed frustrated with herself.

“Then is it okay for us to just sit here?”

“But all we would do is slow him down. It’s frustrating, but we can’t help. I don’t know if we could even if we did have our power...”

Junko remembered the words she’d heard a moment ago. Hiroshi said he was going to use his fame to make the people rise up and fight.

—But when we defeat Zero, will it really be over? What happens after the people rise up? Won’t a hero just be left behind?

“Yuko, I think you need to do something. When a boy’s trying to do something crazy, his friends can’t let him do it alone,” Junko said, but she felt like she was saying it to herself. “I think even putting your love for him aside, it’s going to be difficult to do something about this. But if he doesn’t have somebody who’ll support him no matter what, he’s not going to make it. Even if it looks like he succeeds, even if he becomes everybody’s hero, he won’t last unless he has somebody there for him. If he fails, everybody else will leave him. So he needs somebody who’ll always be there for him, right?”

Yuko nodded at Junko’s words. “I think I understand what you’re saying. But it feels like you can see into his future, sis...”

“I don’t know why that is, but yeah, I think I do. I just have this terrible feeling. Like everything that’s happening is happening because someone wants it to... And like Hiroshi is one of the people they’re controlling.”

“I know you’re scared... but I’d like to think it’s just because you’re on top of a haunted house,” Yuko said, forcing herself to sound cheerful.

Junko chuckled. “When we went here, you insisted on going inside and then

started crying like a baby when you got in.”

“Did I? I guess I wasn’t just scared of Demon Beasts because of the blood in me, huh?” Yuko sighed. “I wonder what Hiroshi’s doing now...”

Junko looked at the news on her student handbook. Things were starting to happen; the newscaster was repeating that no one was allowed to go outside. That must mean that a lot of people weren’t obeying the curfew. And the reason they weren’t was showing on the monitor behind her.

“The mysterious hero who once defeated the Demon King has returned. But this time he is an enemy of public order. He has brutally murdered several knights, and is now calling for rebellion,” the newscaster said expressionlessly.

“They’re lying on the news...” Yuko said angrily.

“But that newscaster isn’t a Liradan. There might be some kind of change,” Junko said. And she was soon proved right.

“We’re getting video from all over the Empire. The ghosts of the old Empire, the priests of the old gods, are starting rebellions all across the land. Citizens are encouraged to stay away from these dangerous areas,” the newscaster calmly repeated.

But some of the video the local reporters were sending in included Hiroshi’s words, and you could hear them softly from the tiny rows of monitors in the back. The volume was too low for viewers to make it out, but the people in the newsroom could hear it. Suddenly, the newscaster’s voice changed.

“No, I think I’m going to tell you the truth. He’s a hero. Not a rebel. Of course, so are the people who rose up to fight. It wasn’t even the Liradans who took over our country. It was Zero, the one who controls them. Everyone! Rise up and fight! I don’t care if I lose my job! Everyone! Rise up!” she yelled, and started to play video of Hiroshi.

But that only lasted a minute before the screen turned blue, and then the TV began playing a recorded program. It was enough to make Junko and Yuko smile, however.

“Things are starting to change.”

“Yeah. I don’t know what will happen, but now we can move. Let’s join their ranks.”

Both of them stood up.

“Yeah. But can we defeat Zero? Zero’s got control of the gods...”

“Huh? He wasn’t saying that because he’d found a way to defeat Zero?” Junko gasped in surprise.

“Huh? But... if we had a way to beat him, couldn’t we just do it?” Yuko looked just as astonished.

Only then did Junko realize her mistake. “Oh no... does Hiroshi not know about Keisu?”

“Keisu?”

“The Liradan we think once sealed Zero. I was sure he knew about her... Okay, now we’ve got something to do. I know what she looks like.” Junko felt the life returning to her limbs, but at the same time, that awful premonition was getting worse.

○

“It’s finally started,” 2V said.

The human staff of the palace had already fled. 2V had ordered them to. But there were still countless figures moving busily about the palace. Of course, they were all Liradans. In the end, 2V was all alone in the huge palace.

“Do the people intend to annihilate you?” one of the nearby Liradans said in Zero’s voice.

2V nodded. “Some of them, yes. I think they’ll find it’s harder than they thought. I’d be willing to bet on it, in fact. Cause I’m not going to make it easy for them.”

There were several screens floating in the air around her, showing the priests charging towards the palace. She could see explosions caused by non-magical weaponry in the surrounding park. She’d ordered Zero to take control of the Liradans, so they couldn’t kill anyone. Armed groups like the priests were able to destroy them and break through.

“But then you should be the one taking control. If you leave your defenses to the Liradans, they’re sure to fail,” Zero said.

The screen changed to show a street near the palace that was flooded with people. The Liradans were trying their hardest to push them back without hurting them, but the humans showed no signs of slowing down. It was practically a riot.

“It doesn’t matter if they fail. Actually, I hope they do.” 2V hopped off her throne and called one of the Liradans over to her. “It’s time for the play to begin.”

“What does the term ‘play’ mean here?” Zero asked. 2V laughed and pointed to the screen.

Brave, the man who’d started the uprising, was now heading for the palace. She doubted he’d come up with a way to recharge his energy inside the palace, but he still probably had some kind of plan.

“I’m going to let them see me die. That’s my goal, is to show them my death. I haven’t accomplished the two things I need to really make this a success, but at this point, it doesn’t matter. How is the search for those two... Kazuko and Keisu... proceeding?”

“Kazuko will be found soon, I’m sure,” Zero answered. “I’ve dispatched one of my most talented units. But are you telling me you intend to lose?”

The second he spoke those words, the whole palace vibrated. It was the rioters. They were almost here. But 2V just smiled.

“Lose? Of course not. Let’s get started. Go ahead and show them your true power. We need to draw that hero out. You have permission to use stun sticks and tear gas,” 2V said.

“They’re not trying to kill them, but...” Hiroshi shook with anger as he watched the scene unfold below.

The people at the front of the mob charging the palace had collapsed to the ground in front of the castle drawbridge. It was like a boundary line had been drawn there, and nobody could go any further. There were Liradans on top of

the bridge with stun sticks, blocking their path.

“I have 10 minutes once I’m inside... No, I need to leave energy for my attacks, so three minutes or so?”

Hiroshi turned his eyes upwards above the palace. There was a huge polygon-like object floating there — the embodiment of Zero. If he could destroy it, he could probably shut Zero down. And if he could do that, 2V would be much easier to defeat.

“What do I do...?” Hiroshi murmured to himself. “Charge in? If I can’t finish this in three minutes, I’m done for...”

○

“Will you take my hand?” Kazuko asked.

Akuto looked at her quietly. “I don’t understand why I should do that,” he said in a calm voice, but Kazuko just laughed.

“Oh my, you’re right, aren’t you? There isn’t a reason. But you don’t know what to do with that power you have, do you? So there’s no reason for you to refuse, either. And right now, the Empire has been stolen from me by my twin. Please, will you defeat her before you make any decisions? Please?”

Akuto understood the logic of what she was saying. But he still didn’t feel like taking her hand. “And that’s why you waited for me here?”

“That’s right. I know how powerful Zero is. You’re the only one who can fight him,” she said, smiling as if she had no doubt that things would go her way. Her attitude suggested that she thought the whole world existed only for her sake. Everyone else in the room understood that this was natural for her.

But still, Akuto looked at her with sharp eyes. “Why don’t you apologize?”

Kazuko didn’t seem to be caught off guard by this. Instead, she simply seemed to not understand what she was being told. “Apologize? For what?”

“Why did you hide my... I mean, the secret of this Empire? Weren’t there lots of wars because of that?”

Kazuko put her hand up to her mouth and laughed elegantly. “Haha, what a silly question. The Demon Kings of the past all knew the secret and started wars

anyway. They tried to destroy the system of the gods itself.”

“But Demon Kings are still born despite being so dangerous... No, someone creates them,” Akuto said.

“Yes. There must be one within the Empire. One must be born every few centuries. Otherwise, the bugs within the system of the gods... the pus, you might say... build up with the system and eventually destroy it.”

“Then I’m...” Akuto fell silent.

If that was true — and it almost certainly was — then all the Demon Kings throughout history were fighting a battle that was never meant to be won, either to destroy the system that controlled the world, or protect the people who obeyed that system.

But it wasn’t fate that made them do it. It wasn’t fate, but a choice they made themselves.

“It’s okay for me to be me, isn’t it?” Akuto whispered to himself.

“I’m sorry? What does that mean? You’re the Demon King. An unstable creature with too much power. That’s why you need to serve me...”

Akuto suddenly cut her off. “No. I’m me. And I decide who I am.” He turned his eyes to look at her.

“But do you have what it takes to make that decision? To carry the weight of an entire country? You don’t, do you?” Kazuko’s smile never wavered.

But Akuto shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. I have them.”

He looked at Keena, then Fujiko, then Yoshie. And even though they weren’t here, in his mind he saw Junko, Korone, and Hiroshi.

“I am the me that loves them. That’s why I’m me.”

None of the girls spoke, but their eyes were all locked on Akuto.

“So you won’t obey your country, then?” Kazuko asked.

“I’ll make you a deal. I’ll defeat 2V and Zero, just like you want me to. But don’t try to control my mind,” Akuto said.

Kazuko smiled and nodded. “You’re a fascinating person,” she laughed. “Very

well. If that's the case, then..."

Kazuko started to take a step forward... and just then, a thin ray of light flashed through the room. It pierced Akuto's chest from behind and passed out through the front.

"Huh...?" Akuto froze. Blood began to seep from his chest.

"A-Ackie!"

"Akuto!"

"Was that... a laser?!"

Keena, Fujiko, and Yoshie all screamed at once.

Akuto put his hand to his chest, and then watched in disbelief as it turned red with blood. He turned in the direction the ray of light had come. "Korone...!"

Korone was there, holding her beam weapon. Akuto's face was twisted with shock and terror, but Korone's expression was completely flat, so empty that there wasn't even a trace of coldness or cruelty in it.

"I had hoped that after it passed through you, it would reach Kazuko as well. But I underestimated your toughness, it appears. However, both Kazuko and the Demon King are my targets. This is my chance to get two birds with one stone. Next time, please do not block my shot. My priority list puts Kazuko above the Demon King," Korone said emotionlessly. Akuto had buckled over from the impact, and now she had a clear line of sight at Kazuko as she aimed.

"No...!" Issei, who had been silent until then, suddenly held out his hand towards the floor. The whole room began to glow in response.

"A teleporter circle!" Fujiko shouted.

The circle's magic seemed to affect everyone in the room. Issei activated the circle, and Akuto and his friends, as well as Kazuko and Issei began to disappear. But Korone quickly skated over to the teleportation circle, putting her own teleporter device on top of it.

"Now the teleportation will be incomplete. Instead, you will appear at a location I designate," Korone stated. Akuto had buckled over from the impact, and now she had a clear line of sight at Kazuko as she aimed.

“No... She’s so fast!” Issei said in a voice like a scream.

But then they disappeared, and so did Korone. A moment later, they appeared in a forest they didn’t recognize. First Akuto, and then the three girls around him. Behind him was Kazuko, and a little further away was Issei. Finally Korone appeared, exactly as she’d been a moment ago.

“I assume that was an attempt to run, but you were far too slow. It will be difficult to flee in this forest with no teleportation to aid you,” Korone said.

“K-Korone...” Akuto slowly rose to his full height.

“Please do not stand between myself and Kazuko.” Korone readied her beam weapon.

“Korone, stop!” Keena yelled, but nothing happened. Korone remained expressionless.

“Stop it, Korone!” Akuto insisted. “Don’t shoot anyone! You can hurt me if you want, but you can’t kill any people...” He slowly staggered towards her.

“The Demon King is not a person. Neither is the Empress. Goodbye,” Korone said.

“Stop!” Akuto summoned his strength and jumped on her. He grabbed her weapon as tightly as he could and pointed it away from Kazuko, and then turned around and shouted, “Run!”

But Kazuko simply looked confused. “Run?”

“That’s right. Run—”

“You’re in the way,” Korone said as she wrestled back control of the weapon. Now it was pointed directly up against his stomach.

“Ackie!” Keena ran towards him. But in the next moment, a beam of light had pierced his body.

“...!” Keena let out a wordless scream.

Akuto’s body began to slump to the ground. Korone carelessly brushed him aside.

“Gaah...” He fell to the ground and moaned. He was still breathing.



“Ackie!”

“Akuto!”

Keena and Fujiko ran towards him but Yoshie was shaking too much to move, and Kazuko was still looking at him in confusion.

“Why did you tell me to run?” the Empress asked, as if she truly didn’t understand.

Akuto answered, the blood dripping from his mouth. “Because you’re like me, you were born with the burden of power... That’s why I decided to protect you... Because I once had someone like that. Someone who knew who I was, but who fought my side anyway, and who died laughing...” he said, moaning.

“Ackie, stop talking...” Keena helped him up.

“Oh... if only Akuto had awakened, these wounds wouldn’t bother him at all...” Fujiko cried in despair. She was using healing magic on him, but it wasn’t working at all. She could see the color draining from his face.

He looked at Keena and smiled as his lips moved, but no words came out. And then his head slumped towards the ground. As Keena held him in her arms, all the strength left his body.

They both screamed his name and clung to his body tightly, as if trying to bring him back to life.

But Korone only glanced once down at his corpse before walking right past them.

“That was far too easy. The Empress’s life wasn’t even worth protecting.” Korone turned to look at Kazuko.

Kazuko smiled at her. She almost seemed to be having fun. “Hahaha, you’re right. He should not have tried to protect me.”

“So you accept that the Empress is worthless? Then there’s no problem if you die, is there?” She raised her beam weapon.

“Not at all,” Kazuko said.

“?”

“There’s no need to protect me,” Kazuko waved her hand, and multiple mana balls appeared around her body.

“Black magic...!” Korone jumped backwards, suddenly cautious.

But amazingly, Kazuko stepped forward after her. “It’s not black magic. It’s the Yasakani Magatama, one of the Imperial family’s secret magics.”

Kazuko waved her hand and the mana balls began to dance and strike at Korone.

“Attack pattern unknown. Initiating close-range reactive dodging...!” Korone tried to twist her body out of the way, but the mana balls moved too fast and too randomly for her to stop them from slamming into her body.

“...! Unable to dodge...?” The mana balls clung tightly to her body. They seemed to be causing continuous damage without ever slowing down.

“They’ll keep dancing until I die, and keep dancing even after you die. That’s how the spell works.” Kazuko began to dance as she laughed.

Korone was a Liradan, but the damage seemed to be too much for her. She quickly opened her purse and jumped inside.

“Oh?” Kazuko’s eyes went wide, as if she’d been caught off guard.

Korone’s body disappeared feet first into the small bag. Her hand was the last thing to vanish, and before it did, it traced out a small teleportation circle to make the bag disappear as well.

“She’s a very talented Liradan, isn’t she?” Kazuko smiled as she looked towards a sobbing Keena. “He’s dead, isn’t he?”

Keena looked at her through teary eyes. “W-What do we do...?”

Fujiko, however, made no effort to conceal her hatred. “Th-This is your fault...”

“Oh? That has nothing to do with me. And like he said, he did what he did because of his deceased friend, right?” Kazuko motioned towards Keena’s chest as she spoke.

“H...Huh?” Keena realized that there was a shining light coming from just

below her neck. “Wh-What is this...? Petey?”

It was the necklace she’d hidden beneath her clothes. She took it out, and saw that it was overflowing with light. At the end of the necklace was a piece of one of Peterhausen’s fangs.

“Petey...”

It was as if the creature Akuto had called a friend was trying to tell them something in answer to their sorrow.

“This is...” She held Peterhausen’s fang gently to her chest and closed her eyes. And then she nodded, as if she was speaking to someone.

“Wh-What’s going on...?” Fujiko asked fearfully.

Keena opened her eyes. “He says there’s a way to bring back Ackie...”

“What...?!” Fujiko was completely confused.

“The Coffin of the Underworld King...” Kazuko said, “That’s the name of the device that can revive the Demon King. And of course, it’s also the device used to awaken him...”

“Why does something like that exist?” Yoshie’s words were tiny and hoarse, like she was overwhelmed with everything that was going on around her.

“There have been many Demon Kings throughout history. Some of them have been psychologically underdeveloped. That is why it is customary for the Demon King to be given several trials. And that’s why the device exists, as a safety measure,” Kazuko said.

“Then in some cases he might not awaken...”

“Most likely, yes. Some have died in the process of awakening. Now, go. I’ll wait here.”

“Wait...?” Fujiko turned her head towards Kazuko.

“Yes.” Kazuko’s smile never left her face. “I’ll be waiting for the Demon King to be born for the sake of the Empire...”

4 - The Last Demon King

“You saw a Liradan in VPS whose job it was to seal Zero?” Yuko asked.

Junko and Yuko had left the abandoned amusement park, and were discussing where to go next. Asakusa was close enough to the palace that they could get there on foot if they wanted. But Junko was insistent that they should find Keisu first.

“That’s right. She was a short girl with a long blade on her back, dressed in a kimono like a believer of Suhara, and with her hair tied back behind her head,” Junko explained.

Yuko looked suspicious. “...Zero knows what she looked like and what her powers were, right? Why hasn’t she been caught yet? The Liradans have eyes everywhere, right?”

“That’s right. And they’ve got the past records to go over too, so they know exactly where she was before,” Junko said. She had no proof of this, but it was a pretty safe bet.

“Then wouldn’t they have captured her already...?”

“Well, we know that she was originally at the Megis temple. But there’s been no reports from there, right?”

“That’s true...”

“Which means Keisu can’t have gone too far. If she can seal Zero, then isn’t it possible that she can hide herself from Zero too?”

“So if that’s true, then what does that mean?” Yuko seemed confused, but Junko’s mind had stumbled across a certain possibility.

“The Megis temple was shut down immediately after Zero took over. No human ever went inside...”

“So she’s still inside!” Yuko yelled.

Magic was off limits, and public services were offline. Junko and Yuko had no choice but to head to the center of the capital on foot. The cars weren't working either, so there were many people walking on the roads. There was no security anywhere because the knights had already gone to the palace, but nobody was rioting or stealing anything.

Strangers were muttering to each other about how they had heard that people were gathering at the palace. There was no news coming from their terminals, so everyone was heading for the city center, just like they were. The roads became more crowded the closer they got to downtown, and when they finally made it to the Megis temple, the area in front of it was as crowded as a flying train platform during rush hour.

But even with all these people around, none of them were going into the temple. The front of the temple was a wide, stone-lined hall, and at its end was a locked glass door.

"What do we do?" Yuko asked. Junko suggested that they go around to the back.

"We should go around the back... Last time I was here, there was a door with a lock that looked easy to bust open," Junko said.

It turned out that she was half right. There was a door around the back, but it didn't look particularly vulnerable.

"It doesn't look that easy to break to me..." Yuko said, just as Junko kicked it hard.

There was a loud bang as the door's support pillar bent, and the whole lock fell off it.

"These temples are built cheaper than they look," Junko said.

"That doesn't mean you need to break it, though..."

Yuko pushed the door open, and it made a loud creaking sound. An empty building has its own unique atmosphere; their footsteps echoed in the cold air. The Megis temple even had its own little shopping mall, so now that it was empty, it felt lonelier than ever.

“It’s going to be hard to find a single person in a building this size.”

“Hm.. you’re right.”

Junko thought for a moment. It would take a lot of time if they just searched every nook and cranny. Which meant they needed to think of a place where their target was likely to be...

“She didn’t seem very smart. Let’s search the upper floors,” Junko said.

“The upper floors?”

“When we were in VPS, she came down from a mountain to see us. I can’t imagine she was always there. Maybe she’s just the type of person who always heads upwards? Like that saying about idiots and smoke.”

“...That’s a mean thing to say about someone you barely know.”

“Hmm... You’re right. She didn’t seem like somebody you should take seriously, I guess.” Junko crossed her arms.

They pushed the top floor button on the elevator. According to the plaque on the elevator wall, there was a cafeteria there.

“If she really is stupid, she’ll definitely be here,” Yuko said as she pointed at the cafeteria’s location on the sign.

“Probably, yeah...” Junko agreed.

They got out on the top floor into a spacious, comfortable lobby, then headed past it into the cafeteria. They could hear the sound of plates clinking together coming from inside.

“Don’t tell me...”

They wouldn’t be able to handle anybody dangerous, so the two of them held their breaths as they approached cautiously. At the end of one of the long rows of tables, they could see someone having a meal. The person was so tiny they weren’t sitting down to eat. Instead, they were standing and bending over the table. On their back was a katana that was far too large for them.

“...Don’t worry. That’s her,” Junko said.

She walked into the cafeteria. Keisu turned towards the sound and looked

suspicious for a moment, but then clapped her hands when she realized who it was.

“Oh! You’re that little girl from before!” Keisu didn’t seem to think she was in any danger at all. There was a pile of fried food on the table; she’d clearly been emptying out the cafeteria’s fridge and reheating it by frying it.

“...Why are you eating at a time like this?”

“I love croquettes... Anyway, the world’s changed a lot since my day. I never expected to find the temple completely empty. It’s kind of depressing.”

“Are you an idiot? Zero came back. He imprisoned some priests and sent the others home. There were Liradans that came here, right?” Junko said.

Keisu’s eyes narrowed aggressively. “I thought I told you I don’t like being called stupid.”

“We don’t have time to talk about this. I apologize for saying that. But Zero’s back. How do we seal him?” Junko said quickly, but Keisu just seemed confused.

“By ‘Zero,’ you mean the Demon King, right? That’s impossible. I may not be very bright, but if the Demon King was back, I wouldn’t be here eating.”

“So you know you’re not very bright... No, forget that. Zero *is* back.”

“I don’t understand. I have a mana-connection to the Demon King, the being you call ‘Zero.’ If he was back, I would know,” Keisu said.

“Then how were all the Liradans put under control? That’s Zero’s power, right?”

“Oh, that’s Zero’s normal power. He hasn’t been revived yet.”

“What?”

“If he’d been revived, he would put all of humanity under his control. Every human is given a ‘baptism’ where mana is implanted into their brain, right? He would try to use that mana to control humans like Liradans.”

“Is that possible...?”

Keisu didn’t seem to think it was a big deal, but Junko was terrified of what she’d just heard. Keisu nodded like she didn’t notice, though.

“Of course, he can’t control their minds themselves, but he can sap their will to do anything, or force them to do things they don’t want. Zero thinks that all of humanity needs its protection. It wants to make a society where humans don’t do anything at all. Zero’s goal is, or should be, the complete cessation of all human activity.” The words came out clearly and quickly, like this information had been implanted in Keisu’s brain.

“Then why is he only controlling the Liradans now?”

“I don’t know. There’s probably someone who’s controlling Zero, who’s stopping him from doing that.”

“Which means if we defeat 2V...” Junko felt a cold sweat run down her back. “Come with me, now! We need to seal Zero again!”

○

“I’ll never forgive you for this,” Fujiko said with rage in her eyes.

For once, Issei didn’t smile. “Humans need to believe something. Even the black mages were never able to escape that need,” he said flatly.

“And black magic isn’t just a tool to create a free society, it’s a faith?”

“The Demon King’s the one who’s supposed to save us and bring freedom. The system that made people believe in the gods was a brilliant one, if you ask me. Humans need a story, even if it’s a bad one. And the truth is always a terrible story. A truly ‘equal’ society is one where everybody has the power of the Demon King. And if that ever happened, the only ending for that story would be a bad one: a mass slaughter.”

Issei looked at everyone who was there. Keena was holding Akuto’s body, and Fujiko and Yoshie were standing there in silence. Kazuko had already teleported away somewhere.

“So Akuto never had any kind of great destiny. He was just a boy unlucky enough to be born with incredible power?”

“He probably just figured that out a few moments ago, which means that what he just did was, in a sense, heroic. Now go, acquire the power. But how much better would it have been if that power could only be used to destroy the

world? Then he'd just have to not do that. But it's actually a safety valve that somebody has to hold, a safety valve that grants someone incredible power."

"Why did you never make this public?" Fujiko asked.

Issei snorted. "Hah! It would just make the war come sooner. A little bit of storytelling kept that away. We just tell people that the Demon King is evil, and everyone believes it."

"But...!" Fujiko almost screamed, but Yoshie put a hand on her shoulder.

"Let's go. We can argue once Akuto wakes up. No, it will be his decision to make then. You know, all I ever did was watch, but I love him. I don't want him to stay dead."

Fujiko took a deep breath, composed herself, and turned towards Keena. "Keena, let's go. Take us there."

"I don't expect this to make up for anything," Issei said, "but I'll teleport you there."

"...We're not going to thank you."

"That's fine. Where do you want to go?" Issei asked Keena.

"All I know is that it's in Roppongi, its latitude and longitude, and how many meters underground it is... There's an underground facility there that was made a long time ago. Is that enough for you to teleport us there?"

"It is." Issei nodded as he began to cast the spell.

"Ooh, send me near the palace instead!" Yoshie cut him off.

"Are we splitting up?" Fujiko asked. Yoshie nodded.

"I need to find Keisu. My guess is that if we haven't found her yet, she might be in the Megis temple. I don't think they'll arrest me if I go now. Oh, and since I don't think anybody will be looking for me now, I'll stream what my goggles see on the internet. Your terminals will be able to watch."

"Alright. Thanks." Fujiko nodded.

Issei summoned the teleportation circle.

Hiroshi was standing by high in the air, but he didn't have any time to rest. A flying combat unit was climbing towards him.

"We're in the middle of a city...!" Hiroshi looked around him. He was above the park surrounding the palace, and there were people all around him on the ground below. He would have to make sure the enemy landed inside the palace.

—*There are 20 of them.*

He checked his energy levels and the number of enemies. He wasn't inside the field, so the energy charge was at 100%. But he'd have to avoid using his high-energy weapons that required a cool down before he could use them again.

"High-frequency blade."

The special alloy claws came out of his hand. They used high-frequency vibrations to enhance their cutting power, and required very little energy to work.

"Hah!" He sliced through the nearest enemy. The suit was faster than his enemy could evade, and he easily sliced them in half.

"It's a pain to figure out where the enemy's going to fall," he muttered to himself as he watched the falling remains of his foe.

But then, the enemy came in formation to try and catch him off guard. Several of them flew at him at once, tracing mysterious orbits in the air.

"But they're probably just programs..." Hiroshi used the eye-tracking on his visor's multi-display to predict the enemy's movements. He spoke to the suit to tell it to hurry up. "Give me a targeting priority list. No laser usage."

"Command received. Enemy flight pattern recognized. If orders are given within .5 seconds, escape is possible. If orders are given with 1 second, destruction of the enemy is possible. Recommended course of action: destruction."

"I'll take the latter. Give me the orders!"

"Attack the target designated by the pointer. Designating first target..."

Hiroshi followed the suit's orders, dancing in between the enemies. His foes were using a pattern that involved three enemies attacking at once, which was effective against a slow enemy, or one that tried to run. But if you could attack them faster than they could hit you, they were helpless.

The combat unit's bullets and laser beams failed to even target Hiroshi, so they didn't fire a single shot. They didn't have time to come up with a new formation to deal with him. It was a battle between computers, and his was better.

"I can win this...! How many flying units are there? Are their reinforcements?"

He looked around after he'd shot down a good number of them. The battle was easy enough that he was able to hear the words coming up from below.

"That's him!"

"That's our Brave!"

"That's our Hero!"

He realized he'd never fought in front of this many people before. Just like Lily had said, he could feel the weight of that responsibility on his shoulders.

—What I do as a Hero...

The responsibility was heavy, but more than that, the fact that so many people were cheering him on gave him courage. It was reassuring to know so many people were on his side, and more than anything, that all these people shared one will. They had to be on the side of justice.

—I'm fighting for the sake of the people... I'm carrying the will of the people, and fighting for it!

Hiroshi felt like he'd just understood something important.

He sliced through the last enemy and checked his energy levels. It would take 20 seconds to recharge to full power, so he'd be fine.

He looked down. The huge polygon, Zero, was below him.

—I don't know how to beat it, but I can buy time...

The inside of the polygon was a virtual phase space, where Zero's program

was being run. In other words, he had no physical body. But if Hiroshi could destroy the majority of the data that kept his program running, it would lose the majority of its functions. That was how Akuto had destroyed the god Suhara.

“Let’s do this fast. I’ll use the plasma ball,” Hiroshi said.

The plasma ball was the most powerful weapon the suit had.

Junko and Yuko were looking up from the ground below, watching Hiroshi. They couldn’t move a muscle. Both they and Keisu were buried in a sea of people.

“Oh no... We can’t move.”

“But what are we going to do at the palace?” Yuko asked.

She was right. All they could do was watch. At least, that was all she and Junko could do.

“Can we send Keisu alone...?”

“No, I can’t move either,” Keisu said. She was stuck in the crowd of people as well. She was so small that she had to keep hanging on to Junko’s sleeve to keep from being knocked away.

“We can’t fly because we can’t use magic... Can you fly?”

“I wouldn’t carry such inelegant equipment.”

“You can’t fly?”

“I don’t like it when people make fun of me.”

“Fine. Let’s get a little bit away, and then come up with a way to get into the palace.”

They started to back towards the Megis temple.

“Hey, how do you seal Zero, anyway?” Yuko asked Keisu.

Keisu seemed to think for a moment before she spoke. “I don’t remember.”

Meanwhile, Fujiko, Keena, and Akuto's body were all inside a vast space somewhere. They weren't sure exactly where "somewhere" was. They knew the latitude, the longitude, and how many meters underground they were. But they weren't sure what this place was supposed to be.

There were countless numbers of huge pillars, several meters in diameter, holding up a ceiling so high above that they couldn't see it. The room was completely empty, except for a single coffin next to the three of them.

"I bet nobody's been in here for hundreds of years..." Fujiko said as she looked around.

The only light in the room was coming from around the coffin. There wasn't even dust on the floor, which was proof that no human had ever been here before. If there were no fibers to fly up into the air, there wouldn't be any dust. It was clear that the only point of this place was to hold this coffin. Without knowing its precise location, there was probably no way to get there.

It felt like the place hadn't been made to hold the coffin originally, but had been abandoned at some point. It was safe to assume that there was no exit and no entrance.

"This is the coffin, isn't it?" Fujiko said.

Keena was the only who had heard Peterhausen's voice. It was probably only the data left behind between the gods, and not some kind of spirit, but it still felt like fate that it had talked to Keena.

"Don't worry. This is it," Keena said.

She tried to lift Akuto's body up to move it into the coffin, but it was too heavy for her.

"Let me take the head," Fujiko sighed, "and you take the legs."

"Thank you. Umphh...."

Keena and Fujiko laid him down in the coffin, and the coffin reacted. A mana screen appeared a little bit away, displaying what work it was doing and why the coffin had activated.

"Do we just have to wait?"

"I guess so." Keena nodded.

Fujiko let her body slump down to the floor.

"Are you okay?" Keena asked. Fujiko answered with a nod and looked up at the ceiling.

"I just started wondering what happens if Akuto never comes back," she said, almost as if speaking to herself, "When he died, I got emotional, but strangely I managed to keep control..."

Keena smiled a little. "I was the same way."

"I want him back. I really do. But..."

"But?"

"Is that really what should happen? When he comes back, will he still be himself? And won't he just suffer if he does...?" Fujiko wasn't sounding like her usual self.

Keena walked over to her, and put both arms on her shoulders from behind. "Ackie is Ackie. He's not anybody else. I'm sure it's the same for everybody else in the world. Maybe Ackie can only be revived because he was created by someone instead of being born, but everybody is who they are. Don't worry."

Fujiko knew Keena didn't have any evidence for what she was saying, and her words only served to remind her that Akuto could be revived because he was closer to a Liradan than human. But she still felt a bit better.

"Yeah. I hope he's okay. And knowing him, no matter how many times he comes back, he'll still make the same choice."

"He'll think way too hard about what's best for society, like he always has." Keena laughed.

The coffin continued its work, but it didn't say when it would finish. Every second seemed to last an eternity.

"Is he okay, you think?" Fujiko asked.

"Don't worry... It'll be fine. Um... If you're really worried, you can pray."

"Pray?" Fujiko asked, surprised at the seemingly idiotic suggestion.

“Yes. Pray. It’s all we can do, right?” Keena said innocently.

But Fujiko shook her head. “Yes, but to God? There’s no such thing...”

“I think there is. If there’s not, Ackie’s just going to have to suffer forever, right?”

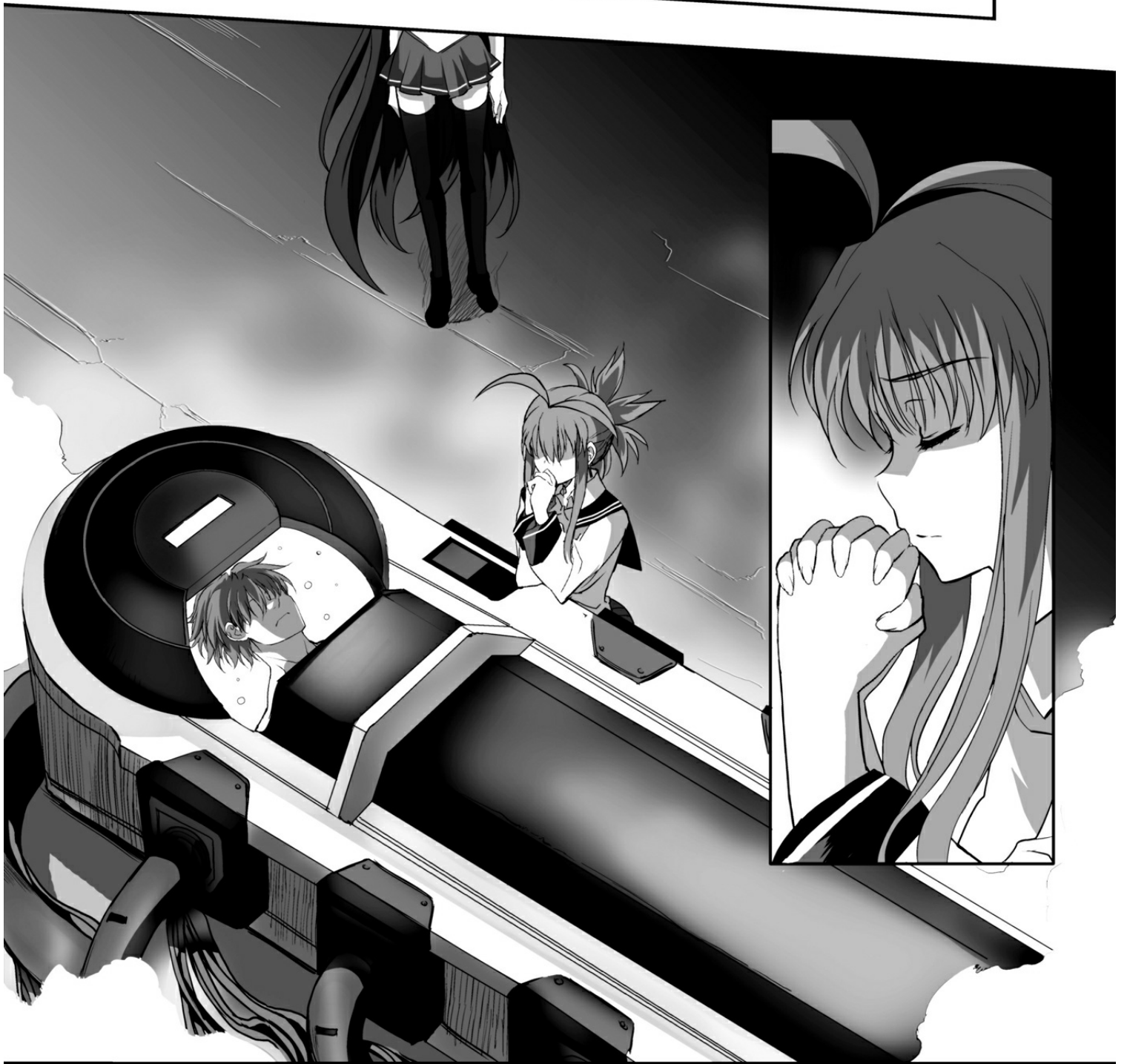
Fujiko gasped. “You’re right,” she said after a moment. “Maybe faith is something that humans need after all.”

The gods were real beings, at the core of the evolution of those humans that believe in them, or perhaps the core of their souls. If you didn’t believe that, then the lives of men called Demon Kings had no point at all.

Keena kneeled before the coffin and folded her hands.

Fujiko closed her eyes and prayed to... “something.”

The coffin silently continued its work. But nobody knew what would happen next.



Yoshie sighed when she realized that she hadn't been teleported inside the palace. "Well, so much for that. I guess the palace is probably guarded. Wait, is this place..."

She looked around and realized she recognized where she was. It was the lobby of the Megis temple. "Well, that's something at least," she said, as she walked over to the window to see what was going on outside. The crowd had swelled to an almost unbelievable size.

"Those people aren't just there to gawk, are they? Man, people are scary when they get mad." Yoshie fiddled with her goggles. The video of what she was seeing began to be broadcast on the net.

"I suppose this is actually the perfect place to look for Keisu though... Oh?" Just before she turned around, she saw a few people moving against the crowd. When someone does that in a group of people, they stand out a lot. "Woah! Lucky me. I guess I've got good karma?"

It was Junko, Yuko, and Keisu; three people that Yoshie knew (she recognized Yuko from watching her on TV). Yoshie went to the entrance to the table and waved to them. "Hey, over here! Wow, I'm so glad I found you!"

But all of them seemed confused.

"Who are you?"

"Are you with the temple?"

"It feels like I know you, but I've never seen you before..."

Suddenly Yoshie realized that she'd only ever met them inside phase space. "Well, it's a long story, so I'll cut it short. I'm Yoshihiko," she said.

None of them seemed to understand what she was saying. Perhaps the idea of using a different identify in VPS than in the real world was something hard to understand for a girl who was used to being honest in everything, because Junko seemed to understand it less than Fujiko.

"I'll explain everything later, but for now, just know that I'm on Akuto's side. And yes, I am with the Megis temple. I helped the priests. Oh right, there's a levitation boat we use for emergencies. It can take us to the palace. I'll explain

on the way.”

The three of them still didn't seem to understand, but at least they knew she wasn't an enemy. So Yoshie took them to the lever that released the boat. There was an emergency escape door halfway up the building, and next to it was a levitating boat with room for six. It used mana to keep itself afloat. Releasing the lever would unmoor the boat.

“If you're doing this for us, you probably really aren't our enemy, but...” Junko said as she yanked the release lever.

“Believe me. I feel bad for tricking you, but I really am Yoshihiko,” Yoshie said again, but Junko only seemed more suspicious. “L-Let's just get on the boat...”

Just as Yoshie spoke, there was a flash of light above. The battle between Hiroshi and the Zero polygon had begun.

“It's dangerous to get too close, but... we have to hurry. Oh, I guess I should take some kind of weapon, too.” Yoshie threw an emergency escape chainsaw into the boat. Then she jumped in herself and grabbed the oars, which were coated with a special film that allowed them to travel through mana. The other three followed, and Yoshie started to row.

“That's the guy who defeated the Demon King...” Yoshie said as she looked up at Brave.

Yuko nodded, deciding to keep the fact that it was Hiroshi to herself. “That's right. And he'll do it again too, I'm sure.”

“Yeah, if he can defeat Zero, that would be great. We'd be just fine then. Yeah, he looks really strong,” Yoshie said hopefully, “so maybe he can.”

“Transferring Anti-Heat Cape. Transferring Plasma Ball.” Hiroshi's suit covered itself in the cape, and then balls of light appeared around it. Each of them was an incredibly intense sphere of heat that would burn anything it came into contact with.

Hiroshi ordered the suit to make a hard dive. He had to make it through the field that blocked his suit from transferring energy and instantly destroy the polygon behind it. This attack would take all the energy he had, and then he'd need five minutes to get his weapons back. He needed to finish things in a

single strike.

His cape flapped in the wind as the balls began to spin around him. It was like a high speed drill slamming down on his foe from above.

“Plasma field stabilization complete. Setting time from contact to release to one nanosecond. Adjusting visor translucency from 23% to below 18%. Deploying dimensional fault field. Contact with the target in three seconds,” the suit reported calmly.

Ahead of him, Hiroshi could see the shining polygon. It was giving off an eerie red light as it reflected the plasma balls, and it was getting closer and closer.

“Go!” When the whole of his field of vision was almost filled with the reflected light of the polygon, Hiroshi was sure he’d won. But then his body was hit by a powerful impact. He didn’t know what had happened, but the crowds below saw it all.

Just before Hiroshi had hit it, the polygon had moved, almost as if it were a living creature. It had seemed to be fixed in space before, but now its body twisted slightly before bounding at Hiroshi like a bouncing ball.

And above the polygon’s mirrored surfaces, there seemed to be some kind of field. Hiroshi only realized after he’d regained his balance that the field had survived his plasma balls.

“The plasma balls dissipated after release. The field appears to be a dimensional fault.”

“A dimensional fault field...” It was the same futuristic technology that the suit used. It was only that field which enabled him to survive the plasma explosion at close range.

—Why...? No, instead of thinking about the reason, I need to get ready for the next attack... Don’t tell me it’s going to be what I think it is!

Hiroshi tried hard to calm himself down so he could think. He got some distance and climbed into the air, but he didn’t turn his back on his foe.

What Hiroshi was expecting was a dimensional severing; the future technology that Boichiro Yamato had used. It probably worked on the same

principle.

Unfortunately for him, he was right. One of the triangles that formed the polygon opened towards the outside. From within it came a shining rainbow ray of light that shot towards Hiroshi.

“Tch...!” Hiroshi dodged. The space around him seemed to shift slightly, like the sky had been sliced open with a knife.

“How much energy do I have left...?” Hiroshi checked the gauge in the corner of his eye. He couldn’t use his weapons, but if Zero was attacking him, the polygon would be unable to use its defensive field.

“A little over four minutes...” He whispered to himself.

But when Zero saw that he’d dodged the attack, it changed tactics. All the triangles on the polygon opened at once. It began to shift form with shocking speed, like folding origami. The polygon became a pair of plates stuck together, and began to spin like a saucer. It charged at Hiroshi in that new form.

“Analyze pattern.”

“The enemy’s mobility rivals ours. It is recommended to transfer control to the suit. Verbal commands will lack sufficient speed.”

“Give control to the suit,” Hiroshi said, trying hard to keep his wits about him.

The suit took over, forcing him to move in unpredictable patterns. But the Zero saucer was every bit as fast, and firing off dimensional severings too. The two of them flew through the sky at speeds far too fast for the eye to follow, leaving an eerie trail of severed space behind them.

—I can dodge, but without control I can’t attack even after four minutes pass...!

Fear seized Hiroshi. Not only could he not attack, but moving this fast was draining his energy faster than it could recharge.

—Do I run?

A moment of weakness passed through his heart. But then he heard a voice from below. Many voices, in fact. A sound like an earthquake was rising up towards him. It was the voices of the people below, cheering him on.

“Brave! Brave!” They were calling his name.

—*This is...!*

He felt heat well up in his chest.

—*I’m not done yet! I still have more time! I’ll keep fighting until there’s nothing in me left...!*

“Brave! Brave!” There must have been tens of thousands of people around the palace. All of them were looking up and cheering for their hero. Their voices were so loud that they were shaking the boat that carried Junko and the others as it floated above the crowd.

But Junko was ignoring them, and looking at Yoshie with shocked eyes. After hearing her explanation several times, Junko had finally realized the truth.

“You’re... Yoshihiko...”

“I’m sorry. I mean it. That’s why I didn’t worry about taking off your clothes and stuff,” Yoshie said as she looked up at Brave. Yuko was staring intently at the battle too, but Junko alone was looking downwards.

—*Th-Then...*

When Akuto had told her to spend time with Yoshihiko once they got back to reality, he was talking about Yoshie. And thinking back, that was right after they’d talked about how it was possible to look different in virtual reality.

—*I was upset over something so small...?*

Junko suddenly found the whole thing ridiculous, and started to laugh.

“H-Hey, are you okay?” Yoshie asked, but she held up a hand to say she was fine.

“I’m fine... And you know, I think we’ll get along just great. You’re a very different person there than you are in reality, though.”

“Oh, that was my attempt to seem like a man. Girls seem to really like it for some reason. Anyway, forget that. Let’s talk about Akuto.” Then Yoshie told Junko about everything that had happened on their journey.

Junko’s expression took on a serious tone. “Then... can Akuto come back to

life?”

“We don’t know. We’ll just have to wait.” Yoshie shook her head, but Yuko must have been listening, because she pointed upwards to the sky.

“If we just wait, we’ll be just fine. And Brave will put an end to all this anyway before he gets here.”

Maybe she was right. To Junko, Akuto was the one who always saved the day. But for Yuko, that person was Hiroshi. And now, almost everyone in the capital was screaming Hiroshi’s name.

“He’s a hero, huh?” Junko whispered. In this moment, he truly was a hero.

And then, the decisive moment came. A light shot up from below — a mana ball. It flew upwards towards Zero before exploding on the saucer’s side. Someone who could still use magic was helping Brave.

“Someone can still use magic...?”

“Who is it?”

Yoshie and Junko said, but Brave wasn’t going to let his chance go to waste.

—An attack from below?

For a moment there was doubt in Hiroshi’s mind, but it didn’t matter who it was. Zero was distracted.

—How much energy do I have left? ...Enough to use the molecular wire.

“Pass control back to me! Wire!” Hiroshi yelled. And then he raced past Zero’s side as fast as he could. The wire in his hand seemed to simply drift in the air, but a moment after he passed by it, Zero’s saucer was sliced open from the center.

“Did I... win?” Hiroshi turned back. His weapons were totally drained of energy; he couldn’t even dodge at top speed anymore. But it didn’t matter. The saucer was trying to reform and failing, as its triangle parts began to separate and fall to the ground.

“It’s over...! I won...!” He felt an indescribable sense of satisfaction. He heard the sound of Zero’s remains crashing into the palace, but then he heard

something even louder than that. It was the crowd yelling his name.

“He did it!” Yuko cheered and clapped.

“Whew... Is it over, then?” Junko let out a sigh of a relief.

“Well, I guess this works as an ending too,” Yoshie said as she stopped rowing the boat. They’d gotten as far as the outer walls of the palace. The crowd had crossed over the walls and made it into the front courtyard, but only they were high up enough to see what was happening inside.

Then Keisu looked up at the sky, before craning her head around as if watching for something.

“What’s wrong?” Yoshie asked.

Keisu held up a hand to cut her off and spoke sharply. “He’s not dead.”

“Huh?”

“Zero’s not dead,” Keisu said. There was no hesitation in her words. She could probably tell by instinct.

“But we know it’s impossible to totally shut him down. That’s not what you meant, right?” Yoshie asked, but Keisu didn’t seem to understand the question. But before she could even attempt to answer, something made them freeze.



“Zero’s control... his ambitions have reached their end.”

Suddenly, a voice echoed. It was audible even among the cheers of the crowd, so of course, it wasn’t a normal voice. It was magically amplified, and coming from the palace.

Someone who appeared to be Kazuko was standing on the palace terrace. The shouts from the crowd got even louder. She made a larger version of herself appear above, so that even the people in the back could see her.

“I don’t know who you are, brave one... but you have given courage to us all. You moved me to action. That’s why I attacked Zero,” Kazuko, who was actually 2V, said.

“No...” Yoshie gasped.

“Th-That was part of her plan...?!” Junko exclaimed. They both knew that she was the one who was talking. Junko went on, asking “Where’s the real Kazuko?”

Yoshie shook her head. “We don’t know. She’s trying to escape right now. Korone was controlled by Zero and chasing her.”

“If Kazuko dies, 2V is empress...? Is that what her plan was?”

“But Kazuko was really strong. I don’t think Korone can kill her. Is 2V just trying to lie to stay alive...?”

Junko and Yoshie were both doubtful. But nobody in the crowd knew about 2V.

“But the magic that you all use will not come back. The gods probably died with Zero. I swear to you all that I will take power and rule the Empire again. Until magic is restored, and the gods in the temples return, I will rule this country as its empress! Until that day comes, I ask you for your help!” 2V said loudly.

“That’s crazy... The Imperial Constitution forbids it...” Yoshie whispered, but the cheers of the crowd drowned her out.

“Glory to Empress Kazuko! Glory to Empress Kazuko!” The voices overlapped and spread out around the palace. Even if they didn’t know the truth about 2V, the people were still supporting an imperial dictatorship. And they were excited

to do it, too.

“Wh-What are they thinking? I thought the people believed in the gods, and used them to guide their lives...” Junko said in shock.

“No, it’s probably the gods who are at fault here. They probably realize how weak the system that depends on the gods is. If nothing else, they all know that Zero was the first Demon King... So basically, they’re done with the priests,” Yoshie said.

“It was the priests who saved the day though, right? Without their help, Brave never would have fought Zero...”

“That’s probably just how the masses think. We’re no different. We’ve been unable to speak up a lot of times. And we’ve believed in stupid things, too.” Yoshie shook her head.

“But if they know the truth... it’ll be okay, right?” Junko said with a pale face, but nobody answered her.

The only sound was the crowd, cheering for Kazuko. As she stood on the balcony, 2V’s whole body was shaking with joy.

“What do you think, Zero? These are the people of the empire! I’ve proved that they’re insane! They rose up to free themselves from oppression, and now they’re begging me to oppress them again!” she said in a loud whisper to Zero.

“It won’t last, though. They’ll come to kill you. And then, they’ll seek a new ruler. That’s why I decided humanity was mad,” Zero said coldly.

“My opinion is the same. I understand. But I wanted to spend my life proving it for myself. I wanted to laugh at every citizen of the Empire.”

“Because it was the people who ruined your life?”

“You can think of it that way if you want. But no matter what the reason was, nobody does what I just did and survives. I’ve got plans to keep myself alive a while longer, though. I’m going to end this world while I’m still feeling this joy. Now, Zero, I’m going to unleash your power.”

“That’s why I became your servant. I’ve been waiting for this moment...”

“It’s coming...!” Keisu’s hair and ears twitched like an animal’s as she spoke.

“Coming?”

“Zero. I can sense that Zero is about to awaken...” She looked around, but of course, Zero was nowhere close by.

“2V is using magic. She must be helping him wake up,” Yoshie said as she looked at 2V through her goggles. She could see the flow of mana.

“Then if we defeat 2V...!” Junko looked up in the sky. Hiroshi was there.

“Please...!” Yuko put her hands together and prayed as she looked up. But Hiroshi’s body was slowly falling.

—I’m out of energy... And the field blocking the energy transfer is still active... I fell into a trap...

Hiroshi grit his teeth. He knew about 2V, of course. And he knew that he had to defeat her. But...

—Even if I did have the energy left, could I kill 2V...?

It was frustrating, but also fortunate. He probably couldn’t have done a thing. The people were still applauding him, and he’d be forced to kill the Empress in front of their eyes. There was no way he could do that. It would mean killing “Kazuko,” who was beloved by the citizens and had massive support.

It wasn’t that he was scared to do it. It was that he was scared of living the rest of his life as a hated, infamous murderer. Even if he knew he had to do it, he still would’ve hesitated.

—But then, Zero is still alive... What happens now?!

“No... It looks like he’s out of energy,” Yuko said as she looked up at the sky.

“What did you say happens if Zero awakens?” Junko asked again.

“Anyone who was baptized will have their minds taken over by the system,” Keisu answered.

“Then it’s all over!” Junko yelled.

The people were applauding her with no idea what was about to happen. Even after Zero awoke, that probably wouldn’t change. Zero and 2V would probably shut down their minds and force them to worship him.

“Keisu... do something!” Yoshie said, but Keisu still seemed like she couldn’t remember something. She just shook her head.

“Now our empire will be eternal...!” 2V yelled. She must have said it for the people to hear, because the answer came back as a frenzied cheer.

“Glory to our kingdom, which will last for a thousand years!” 2V cried.

And then suddenly, an ominous dark cloud appeared.

“A cloud...?”

A shadow fell on the assembled cloud. They looked up to see that it was gathering over the palace, even as the rest of the sky was clear.

“That’s impossible... Clouds don’t work like that...”

“What’s going on?”

A ripple of fear went through the crowd. And then there was a roll of thunder, loud enough to drown out the voices of the crowd. The people began to scream in fear. There was no rain; there was simply crash after crash of terrible lightning, and thunder following quickly after.

“What...?” 2V looked up.

Kazuko was still out there somewhere, but there were no signs that she’d made it into the palace. The priests were inside, they were struggling against 2V’s killer combat machines without their magic. That left one person.

“The Demon King.”

He was floating in the air. Each strike of light illuminated him briefly. The screams of the crowd fell silent.

In the air, they could see a man in shining black. If the light around him was white, and his face had been filled with kindness, anyone would’ve thought he was a saint.

But the man in the air was the exact opposite of that. Behind him were wings of black light. His body was covered in bulky, twisted muscles. His mouth was formed into a cruel, fanged smile. His eyes were flashing with a red light.



“I have a message for those foolish enough to obey the Empress. If obedience will bring back your lost freedom, then you are free to make that choice. But if you want freedom, if you want power, I will give it to you,” the Demon King said. He spread his arms wide, and the people below him began to murmur to themselves.

“My magic...”

“It’s back...”

“He’s returned!” Junko yelled as she looked up at the sky.

“I can use mana. It’s back.” Yoshie tried covering a fingertip in mana. It began to shine with a faint, but unwavering, light.

“I wasn’t talking about mana,” Junko said as she wiped the tears from her eyes.

“I know. He’s back, isn’t he? But look at your face,” Yoshie chuckled.

Yuko was looking at Akuto in fear, but Junko put a hand on her shoulder. “It’s okay. Who he is inside hasn’t changed. I can tell from the way he talks. He’s decided to accept everything.”

“Accept it...?”

“That’s right. He’s going to put an end to all this.”

It happened just as she spoke. The lightning fell on the terrace where 2V was standing. There was a terrible crackling sound as half of the balcony was blasted away.

As the crowd watched, the lump of hardened ash that used to be 2V’s body fell dozens of feet to the ground below.

After a few moments of silence, the crowd realized what had happened. The whole courtyard filled with screams and angry roars. But the Demon King answered with a laugh.

“Zero was my messenger, and now he is gone. But thanks to him, the gods are dead. Why? To bring magic to all of you equally. Why did I kill the Empress? To destroy the ruling order of this world. Now, who will you obey? Or will you live

for yourself? Choose. The time has come to decide the fate of this world. This is the last war. And I am this world's last Demon King.”

5 - Bloody Emperor

2V was walking down a secret hallway behind the palace. She was in the place where she'd spent most of her life. There was nobody left alive who knew about this place. She hadn't even been here for a very long time. 2V was alive.

"You're a very cautious woman. Even out there you used a doll that looked just like you." It was Zero who spoke. Zero, for his own part, had taken the form of a new Liradan he'd been given. It had a beautiful face, but one with no trace of human warmth within it.

"I told you I'd thought this through. And I wasn't lying when I said I was willing to let my life end. It's time for me to retire. You're free now to do whatever you like. That Demon King interfered with your powers. Are you going to fight him? If so, I'll watch."

It appeared that Akuto had the ability to interfere with Zero's control over the gods. That was probably why both of them were called Demon Kings.

Zero left towards the depths of the palace. But as 2V set off in the opposite direction, someone appeared to stop her.

"You sure you haven't forgotten someone?"

2V looked up in surprise. It was a young girl in a classy hat.

"Lily Shiraishi... right?" 2V said casually.

"Yup. I figured there'd be a path nobody knew about, so I searched the whole palace grounds. That's what I've been doing ever since I got here. I knew nobody else would be able to catch you, so it was up to me." Lily flipped her hat around. "I've got my magic back. And it's time to use it!"

Lily quickly charged forward.

"Tch!" 2V made several mana balls appear around her body, and tried to control them with a wave of her hand. It was the same spell that Kazuko had used.

“Those are mana balls with striking power! I guess I just need to strike them harder, then!” Lily struck the area in front of her with countless fists.

2V tried to get the mana balls into position, but Lily struck at them before she could. Each of the balls carried its own striking force even when standing still, so this was a straight up battle of power.

“Raaahhh!” The balls knocked her fists back, but she kept firing away. Each hit from one of them was met with ten of hers. She was hitting at an incredible rate, and the strikes were beginning to push 2V back.

“Gah...!” And then Lily’s power overwhelmed 2V. Her mana disappeared, as countless fists struck her tiny body.

“Dryaaaah!”

Lily’s punches smashed 2V into a wall. She moaned loudly as it shattered beneath her. “Guh...!”

“Hah. Don’t worry, I can’t just kill you. I need to prove to the public who you really are before we can go back to the old system. I’d like nothing more than to snap your spine, but it’s still better to keep you alive. If I kill you, you’ll have gotten what you wanted.”

Lily stretched out her arm with magic to grab 2V by the collar. 2V looked like she would’ve been happier if she was killed.

“Stop... Please...”

“I’m sure you noticed on some level, but humans aren’t that stupid. Once they know the truth, they’ll make the smart choice. The right choice. And I’m not going to let you die before you see that.” Lily smiled cruelly.

And then... There was a low thud from 2V’s body. The impact traveled all the way through Lily’s hands.

“...What?” Lily’s eyes went wide.

2V’s body had been pierced by a spear of light. “Gwah!” She spat up blood and moaned.

“What just happened...?”

The shining sword had come out of nowhere. And after running her through, it vanished. The sword had been made from mana. Not many magic-users could create a sword that could fly that far, or have such power.

Lily looked in the direction it had came from, and couldn't believe what she saw. It was Kazuko, walking down the hall with elegant footsteps.

"Empress Kazuko..."

"Don't you feel a little bad for her? Couldn't you tell that she wanted to die? She'd been in a dark place for so long, with nobody to talk to in person. At least let her spend her last few moments in a pleasant dream." Kazuko walked over to 2V. She was still breathing.

"Y-You bitch..." 2V moaned, but Kazuko simply kissed her. Blood stained Kazuko's beautiful mouth and cheeks. But her smile remained unwavering as she looked at 2V with an expression of compassion.

"Poor girl. You wanted to be like me, didn't you? Did your dream come true in the end? If it did, then I'll kill you before the dream is over."

Kazuko slammed another mana sword into 2V at close range. 2V's body twitched.

"I-Is that really the best way...?" Lily asked.

Kazuko, now completely covered in blood, smiled as she stuck a hand into the wound in 2V's stomach. She moved it around for a moment before finding the heart and ripping it out of 2V's body.

"E-Empress..." Lily couldn't believe what she saw.

Kazuko didn't seem to think, however, that she was doing anything unusual at all. She took the heart and held it in both hands, and began to eat it elegantly.

"Oh, it's like a big dried plum," she said.

"Wh-Why..." Lily said she stepped away.

"I'm taking her mana into my own body. I have to. She got the power that should've been mine: the Mirror of Yata. The power to move one's mind into a Liradan or doll."

“And that’s why you’re... eating that?” Sweat dripped from Lily’s brow.

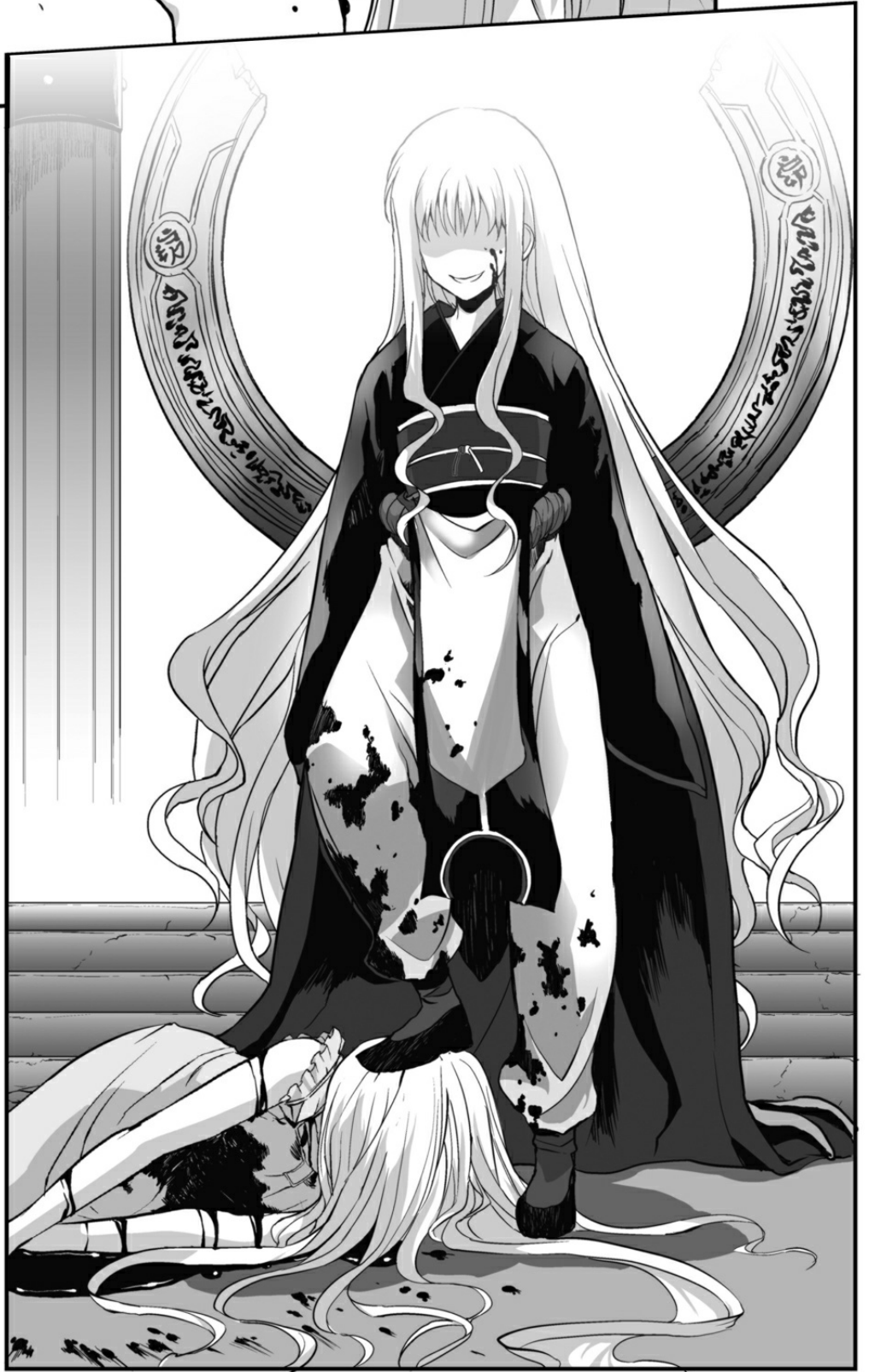
“That’s right. And with that power, I’m going to take responsibility for what she’s done. I’m going to make Zero serve the Empire. For the first time in years, the Imperial Family will rule,” Kazuko declared.

“Wh-What...?” Lily was stunned.

“If both Zero and the Demon King belong to the Empire, then all magic will originate with one source. All will prosper in the name of the empress,” Kazuko said.

Then they both heard a voice.

“No...! I don’t understand what you just did, but I think you’re wrong!” Keena was standing there.



“My master disagrees. He says that the future only comes from continual thought. In other words, you’re wrong.” Fujiko was there too. They’d been teleported to the palace along with Akuto.

But Kazuko kept smiling. Instead, the bloody empress pronounced their deaths. “Then both you and the Demon King will have to die.”

○

Outside the palace, confusion had reached a fever pitch. Akuto had vanished from the sky, but the people’s terror remained. They fled, either on foot, by flying, or using the now-functional flying cars. Yoshie, Junko, and Keisu were the only ones going towards the palace.

Junko’s magically enhanced strength had returned, so now she jumped from wall to wall, carrying Yoshie. Keisu followed her. They left Yuko with Hiroshi, who had safely landed on the ground. The field blocking his energy was gone, so he’d be able to take her out of the area.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Yoshie said. She was talking about Akuto. She still didn’t know him well yet, and she didn’t seem to understand why he’d done what he did.

“He made everyone hate him deliberately. That’s just who he is,” Junko said.

“Why would he want to make them hate him? Does that help him somehow?”

“That’s his way. He carries all the legacies of hatred, and still tries to help everyone. I can tell from the way he was trying to sound like a villain that he wants to make this the last battle of the Demon King,” Junko said. There was passion in her voice, and the life had returned to her eyes.

“So he’s going to defeat Zero and rebel against the Empress? Wooaah! I knew something good was coming, but this is better than I thought!” Yoshie laughed. She looked up at Junko, who was still holding her in her arms.

“...What?” Junko asked. Yoshie grinned.

“You’re in love with him, aren’t you? That’s gonna make for a rough life, you know?”

“Y-You dummy! Now isn’t the time!”

“Right, right. Let’s both throw away our lives for a very interesting man, then.” Yoshie laughed.

○

“So 2V finally kicked the bucket, huh?”

A street far from the center of the capital — The Sage was smoking from a pipe, elbow on the roof of his stopped car, as he felt the disturbance in the mana he was tracing. He sighed.

“The limiter the gods put on the use of magic is gone. People can now use magic without having to be good. Now, which side should I join...?” The sage got in the car while sucking on the pipe in his mouth.

“Bochiro must’ve seen that days like these were coming. I’ll have to see if there’s anything else besides that suit and Zero’s body that he left behind, I guess...”

The Sage — the man once known as the strongest mage, codename USD — whispered.

Afterword

Thanks again for buying this book. It's me, Shoutarou Mizuki.

Now, we've reached Volume 8. This is part 2 of the new storyline, so if you haven't read it yet, please give Volume 7 a try.

And this time I've got news: they're making an anime!

If you bought this volume new you'll already know from the banner on the cover. It starts in April on Chiba TV and other U-stations. As you know, U-stations let you get away with anything, so you can expect quite a lot of craziness.

It's directed by Takashi Watanabe, and the main character designer and art director is Toshimitsu Kobayashi. Series composition and scriptwriting is done by Takao Yoshioka, with additional script writing done by Nao Hoshimasa! I'm so excited to have all these great names working on it. If I had to say what I'm looking forward to most, it's to see how these grown-ups get to mess around and have a good time.

I had a great time talking to everyone, and even though they're all veterans, I could feel a passion in their voices when they spoke to me. I'm sure they'll go way beyond your expectations, so look forward to it! I know I'm looking forward to it more than anybody.

Of course, there's also that drama CD from Beatnix. The voice actors there aren't the same as the ones in the anime, but that's common in theater, so it's like it's a play! At least that's what I want you to tell yourself, and decide who you like better. It's a pretty addicting little game to play.

Then there's Souichi Itou's comic, which is running in Champion Red. I've heard he's planning on keeping it up, and I believe him. It's been really good lately.

Lastly, thanks... oops, out of space. Thanks for everyone who's brought the story this far, and see you in the next volume. There's more fun to come!



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Demon King Daimaou: Volume 8

by Shoutarou Mizuki

Translated by Adam Lensenmayer Edited by Aimee Zink

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